HARMAN SMITH

THE DREAM WARRIOR

The warm comforting light covered me in waves. It washed over me, enveloping me in a strange pleasant feeling that I did not quite understand.

Every night was like this- every night I would close my eyes, and the light would be there, enveloping me entirely. I never wanted to wake up. Never.

“But you must.”

The voice told me that, every night. I sat there, desperately trying to force myself to stay asleep.

“No- please.” I said. “I can’t wake up. I want to stay here. With you.”

The voice let out a reassuring laugh. I hated that laugh- I knew, as always, that it would refuse, and that I would be thrust back into my everyday life. The life that I hated, and would do anything to get away from.

“But who am I?” It asked me. I forced my eyes shut- trying desperately to stay asleep.

“I don’t know.” I said. “But I want to know. I can’t leave. I can’t wake up. I can’t-“

“You can.” The voice said reassuringly. “I will always be here- in your heart. Never forget that. Even when you wake- I am with you, always.”

KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK

“Get up! GET UP!”

Although my eyes were still closed, I was awake now. There was no getting around it: I would have to face my day.

I sat up in bed and rubbed my eyes as the knocking on my door continued, rapidly increasing in force and frequency.

“Get up!” Mom shouted at me, through the door. “Now!”

I stepped to the door and unlocked it. The instant I did the door opened and she grabbed me. Her fingers curled around my wrist as

she dragged me over to her. If I had not locked the door, those fingers would have been around my neck while I still slept.

"You lazy brat." She said, her fingers curling around my wrist as she yanked me through. "Sleeping in again? Your father and I are starving, and you haven't made breakfast!"

She dragged me to the stairs and threw me forward, and I tumbled down. She followed behind me as I rolled down each step. I hit the bottom with a thump and stared at her as she came down after me. She had not stopped berating me as she did this.

"I'll be speaking to your father about removing that lock on your door." She said, as I crawled to my feet. "I am so SICK of you sleeping in… Back on the farm I was up before the sun rose, and I kept doing chores until the sun set!"

She kicked me again after I had stood up, and I fell on my hands and knees again. I was able to keep ahead of her when the second kick was coming, and managed to stay on my feet as I stumbled into the kitchen.

Dad was sitting there, looking livid. A newspaper was open on his lap as he glowered at me.

"What were you doing, you little shit?' He demanded hotly, as I stepped through the door.

"Sleeping."

"Again?" He demanded hotly, his face turning red. "That's all you do nowadays, isn't it? Instead of work, work, working you lay around MY house like a bum. Keep it up and that's all you'll ever amount to."

He kept screaming at me as I got started on their breakfast- my parents were quick to tell me that I wouldn't be allowed to eat anything as punishment for not waking up on time.

I had only been in bed for six hours: the night before they had kept me up until midnight forcing me to clean around the house. They hadn't allowed me to do my homework that night because of that- I would be forced to do it on the bus, again.

“Your coffee is shit.” Dad told me, as he splashed it on my face. I screamed wildly- it was so hot it burned my skin.

“Dear!” My mother said, appalled. “You can’t leave any marks! What if the school finds out?”

“Oh… yes. Yes, that’s right.” He said gruffly. “You burned yourself while cooking. Okay, boy?”

He turned back to his tablet as I turned back to my cooking. Because of the attack, I had let the eggs burn. My Dad complained about it incessantly while he ate, and when he finished up he told me I wouldn’t be given dinner tonight either.

“You’ve gotta learn your lesson, boy.” He sneered. “Can’t let you be like this for the rest of your life.”

They made me clean the dishes immediately afterward- which caused me to miss the school bus. In the end I had to walk to school. Although I was on time, I had not been able to do my homework. My teacher, Miss Krabble, was not pleased.

“Again?” She raged, as she towered over me. She gripped the ruler in her hand so hard that it seemed as if it might snap. “You do realize- that if you fail my class that it will reflect badly on my career and this school’s reputation?”

Miss Krabble was a rather pretty woman- she was very young and just out of college. However, like most of the young pretty teachers at our school, she was much more interested in competing over the attention of our principal, and had very little interest in actually teaching children.

“Well?” She demanded hotly.

Miss Krabble raised the ruler high, and then brought it down on my head with a thwap. The entire class broke out into laugher: This had become a sort of circus for them. None of them had parents that allowed the schools to treat them like this: So seeing me getting relentlessly bullied by the teachers was a lot of fun for them.

I could not buy a lunch, because my parents refused to give me money. I sat there watching everyone else eat, before returning to class. Miss Krabble was in a much better mood now: She was glancing at her phone and giggling as we did our self-guided assignments.

And then, at last, it was over. I gathered up my things, and was about to step out to my bus when I was stopped by Phil Krabble, the school bully. He was the younger brother of Miss Krabble, and was given free reign to do whatever he liked in her class.

"You haven't been doing your homework." He said, his eyes glittered. "Sis isn't too happy with you."

He clenched his fist and hit me. I had to stand there and take it. If I dared to raise a hand in retaliation, I knew that the hall monitors would be on me in a split second. Phil, however, had free reign to do as he liked.

"You don't have a future." Phil said, as he grabbed my hair and tugged. "You're a loser. You'll always be a loser. You'll never be any different." Two of the teachers were standing at the hall, laughing uproariously, occasionally casting amused glances our way. In the other direction Miss Krabble was giggling with another teacher that she had told us flat out she hated. No one was coming to help me.

I remembered the golden light. I remembered how pleasant it had been, and how happy I had felt enveloped inside of it. I never had to deal with this while I was there. No matter how much I didn't want to- I would always have to wake up.

Wake up…

Wake up…

Wake up…

"No." I said.

He stopped. He looked at me. His eyes narrowed.

"What did you say to me?" I clenched a fist and in one smooth movement I decked him, right in the nose.

Immediately the teachers were on me: they surrounded me, screaming their heads off about their zero tolerance policy and how I was a bully. Phil, rather than acting tough, was now pretending to cry to get me in trouble.

It was pathetic. I stood there, my fist still clenched, as I stared down at him. It was hard for me to believe that I was ever scared of him- or that I had ever allowed him to do anything to me. It had been so easy to make him break down and cry. I could feel a sense of euphoria running through my entire body. I knew then that, regardless of what the teachers were saying to me- I had done the right thing.

My parents were not pleased.

"No dinner for a week." My Dad told me primly, as I returned home. I did not answer him: I was so worn out by everything I had gone through today I could hardly think. In spite of the intense scolding I had gotten- from the teachers, from the principal, and my parents… I felt this sense of elevation. This sense of thrill. I felt that today, things had changed.

I did not go anywhere or do anything after returning home- I simply found my bed and slept.

This time the dream was different.

Before the dream had been a bright ray of golden light, bathing me in its warmth. I had loved it more than anything else in my life. I longed to see it, to touch it.

But now it had taken on a new form. It was a vast expanse of meadow that stood out before me. I stared at it. The flowers were bright and vibrant, and the butterflies that lay on them were beautiful.

I simply stood there for a while and looked at them. A bolt of fear ran through me: I was sitting here, wasting time when I could be doing something else. Anything else. I could be helping my parents. I could be studying. I could be preparing for my next fight with Phil. And yet I found myself standing here, doing nothing.

“This is your dream.”

My dream girl was right there, in the grass. She was blonde and angelic, with a soft expression and a friendly demeanor. I liked her instantly. I sat down next to her and looked out over the meadow. It was her voice that I had had heard, these past nights. And now, at long last, I could finally make out her true form.

“My dream.” I said. “Is to do nothing?” A tinge of bitterness welled up within me.

“For now.” The Dream Girl said, laughing softly, as she took my hand. “You will have plenty of other dreams.”

I did not answer her. I wanted to pull away from her. I did not deserve to be around someone like this. Someone so perfect and otherworldly. I was worthless and unlovable. Everyone I knew made sure to remind me of that everyday.

“It’s an empty dream.” I said quietly. “This isn’t- this isn’t what I want to dream.”

She turned to look at me.

“What do you want to dream?”

I closed my eyes and thought: I did not hesitate or hide from what I really wanted.

“I want to hit Phil Krabble again.” I said. “Harder, this time.”

“Would that make you happy?”

The Dream Girl was still smiling her pleasant smile. It seemed as if she already know what I was going to say.

“No…” I said. “That alone would not. But as you said, I will have other dreams.”

She nodded in understanding. I felt my heart go out to her: Only here, in my dream, would I ever find someone who cared about what I said or thought. Someone who would listen to me.

“Your first dream, then.” She said.

She looked out over the meadow, and I saw Phil Krabble there. He was crushing butterflies in his fat fist. I stared at him rather intently. He was laughing- taking joy in destroying something so pure and innocent. The things that brought me joy.

The Dream Girl remained sitting as I stood, prepared myself, and approached him.

"Stop it." I said.

He turned up to look at me with a sneer.

"Who's going to make me?"

I kicked him square in the jaw and he went sprawling. I stood over him as he fell- and then sat up again, crying tears of pain.

"No-No, I'm sorry! I didn't mean it!" He begged me, as without hesitation I got on top of him, my fists clenched.

The butterflies circled around us as I began to hit him, again and again. They spun around and around as I clenched my fist, harder and harder, and struck him, again and again. His cries became louder, and louder, and louder-

"Get up! Get up!"

I opened my eyes. I was once again in my bed. I had spent so long in my dream that I had completely recovered from the day before.

But… my knuckles hurt. I could feel the sting on them as I pushed myself off of my bed and stood up.

I slid out of bed and opened it. When my Mom tried to grab me, I ducked around her and made my way to the kitchen.

I was in a very good mood as I made breakfast. I couldn't understand why: and my parents were put off by it. I had already been punished the night before- so neither of them saw any reason to criticize me. However, whenever they could no fault in what I was doing they felt strangely uncomfortable. I knew that they were looking extra hard to find something to criticize me for. Eventually, they would come up with something. But until then I would be on thin ice.

“We’re not punishing you enough.” Dad said gruffly. But today the eggs weren’t burnt, and so today he had very little to complain about.

I made it to the bus on time today, and as usual the older kids immediately began to surround me. Ned Krabble- Phil’s older brother- immediately began to harass me over what I had done.

“You’re done, kid.” He said. “You’re finished.”

“Finished with yooooooooou!”

I lunged myself at him without really considering the consequences. He was bigger and older than me- and he had his friends with him to boot. All of them began to beat me up as the bus driver, who had made a policy ignoring such things until someone drew a knife, carelessly drove us to school.

I was sore by the time I limped off the bus- I had put up the best possible fight I could, and couldn’t quite manage. Phil was waiting for me outside of our classroom.

“You would look at home in a toilet.” He sneered at me. He punched me, hard in the shoulder so hard that it stung.

I would have attacked him right there- but I was so tired that I could not justify it. Miss Krabble, who was watching us, gave us an approving nod as I walked away from him- only for him to trip me.

“Phil, please be more careful.” She said. “He might hurt you again, the delinquent.”

It went that way for the rest of the day. Phil would punch and kick me every time he walked by my desk, and would throw things at me whenever we would be doing our assignments. Or more accurately, when I was doing my assignments. Phil did very little classwork. Ms. Krabble paid no mind to this- but was very quick to step in whenever I made any sudden movements towards him.

The entire day went by like that. I was very glad when I finally stepped off the bus and onto our driveway.

“Time for chores.” Mom said, the moment I walked through the door.

I spent the next several hours scrubbing the kitchen: I did not stop until it was time for me to make dinner, and Dad was very quick to remind me that I would not be allowed to eat tonight.

And then it was over. I was back in bed. Once again I fell asleep, and once again I was drawn in by the Golden Light.

But this time… I had gone to bed far later than I would have liked. I would not get enough sleep.

"You're back."

The golden light took the form of a house this time. I was sitting at the kitchen table, watching as the Dream Girl cooked for me. I sat there and watched as she hummed to herself as she worked. I watched her in awe: I had not seen another person cook since I was too small to do it myself.

"Thank you." I said softly. "It looks delicious. I just wish it was real."

She smiled at me.

"Who said it wasn't real?" She said cheekily, as she set the table in front of me. It was the biggest spread I had ever seen- filled to the brim with food that I would never have been allowed to eat myself at home.

"This is just a dream." I said. "No one would ever do this for me- in real life."

She looked at me. I could not make out her expression. I knew she was beautiful- but whenever I looked directly at her I could not quite make out her features.

I began to eat, and I found the food to be delicious. I couldn't stop eating: I hadn't eaten in two days, and the fantasy of having something- anything to eat overwhelmed me.

"I wish I could dream about something more interesting." I said.

"What is more interesting than what you want right now?" She asked me.

I shook my head.

“This isn’t about me.” I said. “I need- I need to do things for other people. I need to be able to do things- to know things. To be better than I am now.”

“We spoke of this last night.’ She said. “In time, you will have different dreams.”

The light began to fade. I knew that I was waking up.

“Good-bye.” I said softly. “And thank you.”

I woke up. There was no knocking on my door today- it was a weekend. My parents were probably passed out drunk, and I would have time to make myself something to eat.

I had gotten downstairs and was making myself breakfast when a strange realization came over me: I wasn’t hungry. I hadn’t eaten in two days, and I wasn’t hungry.

I thought the feeling would pass when I sat down with my plate, but it didn’t. I sat there staring at it. It was excellent- it was the same thing I had had in my dream last night- but it didn’t look good. I couldn’t bring myself to eat it.

I felt disgusted with myself: I was wasting food. The feeling of shame welled up within me, and I forced myself to choke it down. Usually I would have no problem doing that- but I couldn’t do it today.

I was afraid that I was sick.

But other than not being able to eat, I was perfectly fine. I spent my day catching up on all of my school assignments and planning out my week. I was interrupted in the middle of this by my parents.

“What are you doing?” She snapped.

“Making plans.”

She took the paper in her hands and ripped it apart.

“We make your plans for you.” She sneered. And that was how I got nothing done that weekend.

Sunday was worse, because that was the day my grandparents came to visit. Although all of them had been millionaires early in life, they had done nothing to help us as they spent their wealth on trips around the planet. It was not uncommon for them to be living in a foreign country, fly back to visit me on Sunday, and then fly back when the day was over. My parents often worried that they would spend every cent they had before they got to see any of it.

It was an unusual relationship that my grandparents had. In his fifties, after having his one child who would become my Mother, my grandfather confessed his love to my other grandfather, while he was sleeping with both of my grandmothers. So my grandfather became gay, and my other grandfather became bisexual and continued sleeping with both of my grandmothers. For tax purposes they had remained married to their original spouses.

They took a very particular interest in me.

"Getting your dick sucked yet?" Grandpa Nick the Gay Grandpa asked. He was my Mother's Father and spent his time watching my other Grandfather and my Grandma's having threesomes.

"Nick!" His wife, Kayla said outraged. "He's too young for that!"

"So are the boys in Thailand, hyuk hyuk."

"Nick!" Venetia, the other Grandma, said sharply. "We agreed not to discuss that with him yet!"

Grandpa Dick nodded, his expression set firmly on me. "These American boys…" he said slowly. "Are… different than Thai ones."

He tried to reach out to touch me- but my Mother quickly dragged me away. I felt a surge of affection for her as I clung onto her tightly. As bad as my parents were- they would never let my grandparents rape me.

"You can make a lot of money living with us, boy." Grandpa Dick said. "I got my own private island… you can meet a lot of rich and powerful people, if you come there with me."

“He’s needed here.” Mother stressed. I clung to her more tightly. “We’re going to need to see some real money if we’re going to give him up to you.”

Grandpa Dick looked annoyed at this: it had been a sort of a push and pull situation. My grandparents wanted me to go to this Island- but my parents wanted money for it. I hated my grandparents, so the thought of staying where I was fine by me.

I was glad when my grandparents left and I was allowed to go to my room and fall asleep.

The Golden Light enveloped me again. The Dream Girl was staring at me again. This time she looked very sad.

“This… is your life.” She said. “Doesn’t it upset you?”

“Yes.” I answered. “But it’s normal to be upset.”

“No… it’s not.” She said. “Your parents are putting you in a dangerous situation. Can’t you see? They fully intend to give you up- once they settle on a price.”

“They wouldn’t do that!” I insisted. “They need me here. Didn’t you hear her?”

The Dream Girl fell silent. She looked so sad that I felt that I had to comfort her.

“It’s alright.” I said soothingly. I stepped forward and touched her long blonde hair, stroking it tenderly with my fingers. “This is what I want. As long as I have you, I’ll be-“

“Me?” She repeated. She turned away from me, her long blonde hair billowing behind her. “How can I help you? I’m not real.”

“Who else is there?” I exploded. “Who else do I have?”

She looked at me, harshly. Her gold colored hair flowed around her head, as if she were underwater. It was entrancing.

“You have a dream.” She said quietly. And then I awoke.

My first thought was to be upset: The Golden Light had not enveloped me in its embrace tonight. I had not been able to relax. I

had not learned anything, or gone anywhere, or enjoyed another meal. I had simply stood there, in the void, and allowed the Dream Girl to berate me. I didn't like this at all: Even the Golden Light wasn't there for me anymore.

It was a sobering thought: For as long as I could remember it had been the Golden Light that had held me, and comforted me when it all became too much. And now- even that- wasn't doing it for me anymore. I was angrier at the Dream Girl than I was at my parents, or my grandparents- because they were acting as they always had. The Dream Girl had ruined my night, and likely didn't even know it.

I got down to breakfast before my parents started knocking on the door. Mom and Dad said nothing to me as I served their food, and allowed me to set a plate for myself this time. I was starving- I had not eaten food outside of a Dream in three days- and I so I was very eager to have something to eat. Dad noticed, leering at me over his newspaper.

"You eat like a pig." He said. "Oink oink."

"Really, you're disgusting." Mom told me. "You eat like you haven't eaten in days!"

It was typical for my parents to completely forget about the punishments they gave me- once they were over, that is. I said nothing to them as I finished my breakfast and got on the bus.

Phil Krabble was standing in the doorway. He didn't live on my street- so that meant the bus driver allowed him to stand in my way as the bus pulled out to my stop.

"Move." I said, annoyed. He smirked at me. The driver was looking down at us, frowning.

"What's going on?" He sneered. "Get in the bus." He was speaking to me and not Phil.

It was like he couldn't see Phil at all. I tried to push my way past him- but he pushed me back, laughing. I lost my temper and hit him-

“No fighting!” The driver said suddenly. “You little shit! You can walk!”

He closed the door and took off. I could see Phil laughing at me from the window as the bus shot away. I watched it go- for a brief moment letting the unfairness of it all overtake me- before I broke out into a sprint.

The bus, obviously, was quite a bit faster than me. But I knew the route. I was able to cut through the neighbor’s yard, leap over the pond by jumping from rock to rock, and was able to make the next stop.

I was almost out of breath when I came up to them, and the kids waiting there turned to face me, open mouthed. They weren’t sure what to say.

When the bus came to a stop, I climbed inside with the others- only for the driver to grab me by the neck.

“What do you think you’re doing, you little shit?” He thundered. He throttled me slightly: my body shook under his grip.

I didn’t even think about it. I punched him, as hard as I could. He reeled in pain as I slipped out of his grip and darted into the back.

Phil hadn’t noticed what had happened- he was sitting in the back laughing about what he had done with his brother when I smashed his head with my backpack. The blow caught him by surprise and knocked him out as I raised the bag again to hit his brother.

I hit him once before the driver wrapped his arm around me, and Phil’s brother stood up and began to pummel me.

I cried out in pain with each punch: I spit blood and gagged on It as he hit me over and over again.

Phil’s brother was out of breath when the driver tightened his grip around me and dragged me to the front of the bus.

“Never ride on my bus again!”

He threw me out, face first into the ground. The double doors behind the bus slammed shut, and once again the bus began to take

off.

I lay on the ground, breathing heavily. I had been so thoroughly beaten that I couldn't move- I wanted to. But it was too much. I blacked out for a bit- and the Golden Light enveloped me completely.

The Dream Girl was crying.

"I'm sorry… I'm sorry…" She said. She had her arms wrapped around me. I could feel her touch on me. Instantly I felt all of my anger towards her disappear. She truly did care about me. The anger I had felt towards her for what she had done to me the night before disappeared entirely- I knew that I couldn't blame her for something like that again.

"Don't… cry…" I rasped. The Dream girl did not listen: if anything she kept crying even harder.

"This will not be the last time you suffer." She said. "You're going to keep fighting them- aren't you?"

"I am." I said to her. "I won't be pushed around like this."

She shook her head, smiling softly as tears dribbled down her cheeks.

"They're cruel." She said. "So cruel… and what's worse, they fear those who they are cruel to. You are not like them."

Her tears were slowing, now, and now she spoke with more conviction.

"Oh, sweet dreamer…" She said. "Thy power is thine own. You will fight, and fight, and fight, until there is nothing left standing in your way."

"I have to." I said. "It's the only way to make my suffering stop."

She nodded, her expression resolute.

"Oh, sweet dreamer… know that I am here, always. In your heart, and in your mind. I will be here, waiting for you when you are weary. Remember… remember my face, and my voice."

I awoke on the ground staring up at the cloudy sky. I sat up. I was aching, still- the blows that Phil's brother had inflicted on me still deeply stung. I struggled to stand, my mind still processing what had happened… if the driver had not stepped in, I likely would have won that fight. A furious, righteous anger began to well up within me. I was already thinking about round two.

Yes… I would fight them again, because I had to stand up for myself. No matter what happened- I would not back down.

I staggered to my feet, swaying slightly, as I limped the distance to school. I had walked there before, several times, but it was quite long ways away, and I had been in good condition last time I had had to do it. My head was throbbing with each step. More than once I felt like I would collapse.

The instant I reached the front door of the school I tried to open it. It was locked from the inside- no one came to open it. I pounded on it so long that eventually my hands turned raw.

I was exhausted- I needed to lie down. I was starting to regret coming to school, and should have just gone home and rested. My head was throbbing. I pressed myself against the glass door and shut my eyes, taking a deep breath. I couldn't pass out now. I had to live my life.

I was about to pass out again when the door suddenly opened and someone grabbed me. The shock of it woke me up.

"Playing truant are you?" Principal Mann growled. He was an older man, white haired in his fifties with a strict disposition. He had been in the military, and had committed many war crimes against his country and others.

I was too tired to respond. I was dragged into the school and into the office. Miss Krabble was waiting for us. Her hair was oddly disheveled, as if she had just gotten out of her bed, and her lipstick was rather smudged, as if something had disturbed it.

"This boy has been causing me nothing but problems." She said, as I was thrown at her feet. I tried to stand up again, but the Principal

kicked me again, and I went sprawling. “This isn’t the first time he’s skipped class- he’s a true delinquent.”

“Yes, I’ve just gotten word that he’s been banned from his school bus to-day.” The Principal said. “Pitiful.”

I looked up at him.

“How exactly can you blame me for truancy when I got kicked off the bus?” I demanded hotly. My fatigue was overwhelming me- but I knew I couldn’t back down. If I did, this would continue forever. It would stop now, or I would make it stop.

Principal Mann raised his leg and kicked me again.

“Don’t talk back to me.” He said coldly.

I grit my teeth. I had told myself that I wouldn’t back down from a fight against Phil and his brother again- but I couldn’t stop at just them. There were others just like them in this world. It was me against them.

I remembered a quote I heard once- ‘No one is coming to save you.’ Well. No one was coming to save them, either.

I forced myself to get to my feet, my legs wobbling- as the Principal raised his leg again time I tried to dodge- but again I took the hit.

“Thankfully your parents agreed to sign a disciplinary form.” The Principal said his eyes glittering. “I can do whatever I like with you- with no fear of legal repercussions once all the documents have been signed.”

“Break his legs.” Miss Krabble said, harshly. She was looking happier than I had ever seen her. She was rubbing her bare thighs together in anticipation.

“I have no intention of crippling the boy.” The Principal said coldly. “If I were to cripple every young aspiring athlete, the programs would lose all of their best players. No… we need to put him to Work.”

“Work…” Krabble said in disgust. “He can’t even show up to class on time.”

“Which is why he must be treated as a slave.” The Principal said. “We must regulate everything he does and control his time here to ensure that this never happens again. He must not be allowed to go anywhere but home to school, and back again. Until he earns his responsibility- he will be our prisoner.”

Krabble gave a curt nod.

“Yes… his parents know better than most about his behavior.” She said. “They will support us in what needs to be done.”

She was the one that kicked me this time, and I fell flat on the floor, winded. I was breathing heavily.

“You won’t be allowed to do anything ever again.” She whispered, as she pressed her heel on my back. “After what you’ve done to my brother-“

“Your brother is a little shit who needs his whore sister to fight his battles for him.” I told her.

She stomped on me so hard that it felt like the spike on her heel was stabbing through my back.

“We look out for each other.” She said. “Because we love each other. Tell me, child- does anyone love you?"

I froze. The images of everyone I knew in my life- my parents, my teachers, my classmates- not a single one of them cared about me at all.

Was it true? Did no one love me? If no one loved me- did that mean- that I was wrong?

The image of the Dream Girl rose up in my mind. I closed my eyes, picturing her there. She had been there for me. She had always been there for me. It was then that I knew.

“Yes.” I said, my voice ice cold. “Someone does.”

I spoke with such conviction, and such firmness, that she was taken aback by it for a second. She recoiled, and then looked at the Principal.

“Several weeks will break him.” She said. Her voice trembled a little. She didn’t seem quite sure of herself.

“Let me inform his parents.” The Principal said. “We wouldn’t want any misunderstandings about what we’re going to do to this brat.” He stepped over to his desk and raised the phone to his head. Miss Krabble was still standing over me, her heel still in my back.

“You think you have balls?” She breathed down at me. “You think you’re tough? When I’m through with you- you’ll be begging for my approval. You’ll learn to show my respect.”

“You need to earn it.” I rasped.

She laughed cruelly at me. “I have a degree.” She sneered. “I put myself $200,000 in debt so I can put little dicks like you in their place! I’ve earned the right to treat you like dirt under my shoe!”

I struggled vainly under her as she held me down.

“That’s enough.” The Principal said, as he set down the phone. “Until we get the parents signatures on the necessary forms we can’t legally keep doing this him.”

Miss Krabble looked up at him, scowling.

“We’ve already gotten their permission!”

“Yes, but I need their signatures. For Legal Purposes. Let him go, for now.”

She raised her leg and removed it from my back. I was in such pain that I could barely move.

“I hope you’re learned something from this, young man.” Mr. Mann said, as he looked down at me with a condescending stare. “Fighting doesn’t get you anywhere. Just sit still and do what you’re told, and someday- when you’re older- you will be a functional, obedient member of society. Violence never solved anything.”

I sat there, glowering at him. He had been a War Hero who had gotten into several confrontations. The idea that someone like that would try and tell me that violence solved nothing was downright insulting.

“Go to class.” He said.

From that moment on I was chained to my desk, hand and foot. I could not move a muscle- and so I had to sit there and take whatever abuse came my way.

“Ugh!”

I reeled back, my nose bleeding, as Phil grinned, raising his large textbook for another swing. Miss Krabble was standing in front of the classroom, drawing on the chalkboard, ignoring him.

I could barely focus on the lesson: I could feel myself blacking out. When the final hit came, I did.

The Dream Girl was waiting for me again. We were in the classrooms by ourselves. The warm, golden light trickled in through the windows.

“I can help you with this!” The Dream Girl said brightly, as she pointed to the book laid out in front of me. “See, this here is the-“

The lesson was so much easier and more straightforward when she was the one teaching me. I sat there watching her as she spoke in gentle, encouraging tones. I could feel myself absorbing the material-

A splash of water hit my head.

“Pop quiz.” Miss Krabble said loudly, and the class erupted into cheers as I was forced back to reality. “Let’s see how the class dunce does, shall we?’

She set the paper down in front of me and smiled sinisterly. I glanced at it. I picked up my pencil and then filled out the questions. The class watched, with bated breath. They were snickering under their breath. They all thought they would feel a lot better about their own scores once they saw mine.

“See, class, when you don’t pay attention in school you’re going to fail.” Krabble said, smiling, as she took the paper from me. “See, this question is… Right… and the next… right… and the--- that’s right too…”

Her expression went from one of confidence and amusement to downright horror. Her hand trembled as she stared at the paper in her hands, her mouth open.

“100%.” She whispered. She sounded horrified. “How- how did you get them all right?”

She leaned forward and grabbed my neck.

“You cheated!” She cried, shaking me. “Someone gave you the answers! I know they did! I didn’t teach you shit! I know you don’t know this!”

I had not been given the answers- the Dream Girl had taught me how to do it while I had been asleep in class. Miss Krabble had thought that I had not been paying attention. I wasn’t supposed to pass that test- let alone get a perfect score. And the realization of that drove her nuts.

She took the paper I had just gotten a perfect score on and ripped it right in front of everyone.

"Zero." She said, her voice ice cold. “We have zero tolerance for cheats.”

I tried lunging at her- I was livid. But the chains were too much, and I fell out of my seat. The entire class laughed at me as I squirmed on the floor. Chained as I was, I couldn’t even get back into my chair.

“You’ll be written up for this.” Miss Krabble said, as she turned around and walked back to her desk. Phil got to his feet, and started kicking me as she wrote out her report.

I was so worn out that I could barely move as I was dragged by the neck to my transport vehicle- a heavily armored thing that looked like it belonged in a warzone. While all of the other kids pointed and laughed at me, I was thrown inside.

There were no seats, and no windows. So I was forced to sit on the cold hard floor in complete darkness. I had to brace myself against

the force of the vehicle's momentum- it rather felt like the driver was speeding- every turn sent me tumbling from side to side.

My parents were there when the doors opened.

"Well." Mom said. "Well well well."

"You're in big trouble young man."

They each grabbed me by an ear and dragged me up the sidewalk. The transport vehicle's door slid shut behind me, and immediately it took off, tearing through the street and knocking aside the neighbor's car.

When we reached the door Mom opened it, and then threw me aside. She kicked me before I had even stopped moving.

"You little shit." Dad said, as he advanced on me. "You little shit."

"You're a disgrace." Mom said, as she stared down at me coldly. "They called me at work because of what you did. My boss was furious: I lost that promotion because of you!"

"We can't keep taking care of you like this." Dad sneered. "You're not a kid anymore- you should have a job and be helping us pay for retirement. You need to be taking care of us, now. Why do you think we had you, you ungrateful shit?"

"Without us you wouldn't even be alive." Mom said. "You need to be a little bit more grateful."

"You need to work harder."

"You need to give us money."

I close my eyes. My head was throbbing. This… this was no different than what was happening at school. This was-

This was…

The golden light enveloped me again. Once more I found myself on a sunny hilltop. The Dream Girl stood there, facing the setting sun. I walked up to join her.

"Your parents." She said. "They're terrible people."

“I have to respect them.”

“No- you don’t.”

She turned to face me.

“It’s time.” She said tonelessly. “You need to bite back. If you don’t do so now- these people will push you around for the rest of your life.”

I stood there, thinking, as I stared out at the sunset.

“Stronger… I need to become stronger…”

The Dream Girl stepped up next to me and took my hand. “Come on.” She said gently. “Let us begin.”

She led me behind the tree on the hill to where a chain lay, embedded into the trunk. The Dream Girl bent over, grabbed the chain with her hands, and stretched them to full length.

“A chain- is only as strong as its weakest link.”

She raised her hand and brought it down. A flash of light burst from her, and the chain shattered.

I shook my head.

“I can’t do that.” I said. “My life isn’t a dream.”

She smiled at me, as the chain somehow reformed itself. “The method doesn’t matter.” She said. “What matters is the result.”

She wrapped the chain around my wrists. I stared at them. My first instinct was to pull away from it. But I knew that I had to meet this challenge head on. I allowed her to restrain me.

“You will break the chain.” She said. “How exactly you do that is up to you.”

I looked at the chain and tugged at it. It felt just as it did while I was in class. I looked at how it was embedded into the tree, and then yanked. It didn’t budge.

I spent all night trying- but I couldn’t make it budge. When the night was over, The Dream Girl smiled sadly at me.

“Failure breeds success.” She said. She sounded as if she were trying to reassure me- but both of us knew that nothing would change anytime soon.

When I awoke, I was still lying on the kitchen floor. My parents had just left me there after I had passed out. My wounds were untended too, and they didn’t even think to put a blanket over me.

I sat up, wincing. The pain- it was too much. I lay back down. I longed to head back to my room- but I would have to climb the stairs for that.

My arms especially felt heavy- it rather seemed like I had really spent the past several hours pulling on that chain, as I had in my dream.

I rolled over on my stomach and began to crawl- through the kitchen, into the entrance wall, to the stairwell, and then finally up the stairs. I was exhausted when I forced myself to my feet and collapsed on my bed.

The Dream Girl was there, again.

“You’re back.” She said, surprised. “You’re- exhausted. Aren’t you?”

I couldn’t even speak: I didn’t want to do anything but lay there with her and enjoy the golden light over us.

“Come here.”

She wrapped her hand around me and helped me to my feet. I had been in such pain that I flinched, involuntarily- but she simply smiled at me.

“You’re safe here.” She said. “This is a domain of your own creation- your very own realm where you are the master of your own fate.”

The Dream Girl walked me across the meadow to a large basin- still clear water sat there.

“Please get in.”

“Huh?”

She pushed me in, laughing, and I fell, sputtering slightly.

The instant I hit the water, bubbles began to burst forth and I could feel a warm feeling wash over me.

"You must rest." The Dream Girl instructed. She sat down on top of the rock above me, and crossed her long legs. "You have worked enough for tonight- now allow yourself to recover from your battles."

"I can't rest now." I protested. "I still haven't learned how to-"

"Rest is just as important as work." She said firmly. "Please remember that."

She was staring at me rather intently. I couldn't tell what she was thinking- in fact, I felt as if she wasn't truly there at all.

The water was so warm, and so light, that I felt like I was flying as I lay there, the bubbles covering me. The golden light shone down on me, and I shut my eyes, deep in thought.

"This won't help me." I said quietly. "I couldn't break the chain- and resting now isn't going to get me ready to fight back."

"Do you think your heroes don't rest?" She asked primly. "A man is someone who rises up when the situation arises. That time will come- but not now. Enjoy you life, so that when challenges come you have something to fight for."

"It feels wrong." I admitted. "I should be working."

"You will be- once you awake." She said. "Please."

The pain in my body was ebbing away- I could feel nothing but the warm, pleasurable touch of the water. It was just a dream- when I awoke, I would be just as banged up as I had been before. And I would inevitably return to my daily routine of being tortured and abused by those around me.

I couldn't allow that to happen. I couldn't. I couldn't- I couldn't-

"Relax." The Dream girl said again. And then I awoke.

My first thought was to be upset- I had gotten used to the dream. But a split second later I was awake and alert, and anxious to begin my day.

“Get up! Get up!”

Mom was rapping at the door. She wanted me to make breakfast. How I was going to do it in my condition, I had no idea.

I slid off the bed and stood up- and felt no pain. I froze for a second- unable to process it, before I turned to my mirror.

All of the cuts, bruises, and scrapes I had gotten the previous day- were completely gone. I stared at myself. I touched my skin, to check for scar tissue. But it was smooth and clear.

The door burst open and my Mom burst in.

“What are you doing, you little shit?” She screamed at me.

“Just getting dressed.” I lied.

She took one look at the mirror- and raised her fist and punched i, causing a large crack to run throughout it.

“We spend way too much on your clothes.” She sneered, as she pulled back her fist. “I want you to go to bed in your school things so you can get right up in the morning. I don’t want to hear anymore excuses, do you understand me?”

She looked at me rather intently.

“What happened to your injuries?’ She asked.

“I soaked them for a bit and they healed right up.”

She looked at me, thinking very hard. It looked like hard work. Finally she turned away.

I followed her downstairs and went to breakfast. My Dad gave a start when he saw me.

“I must not have hit you hard enough.” He sneered. He returned to reading his paper. I made them breakfast- but the eggs weren’t exactly right, and Dad followed me out onto the street, screaming at me, as my Mother threw me into the transport vehicle.

Again, I was tossed and tumbled around the vehicle as it took me to school. When the door opened, Principal Mann and Miss Krabble were waiting for me.

They very quickly attached the chains onto me and then strapped me to a wheelchair to wheel me into the school. It dawned on me then that I would never, ever be allowed to walk around the school freely. At home I would still be expected to do my chores- but here, I would be chained up and supervised near constantly.

I was placed inside the classroom and forced to watch as the rest of the class spent the entire day running around and having fun. Miss Krabble did nothing to stop them- if anything, she relished the chance to rub it in my face.

"You deserve this." She said to me slowly, as Phil Krabble began to grab a girl by the hair and force her to kiss him. "You're a bad kid. You deserve this." The girl let out a cry as she tried to push Phil away, but he grinned as he ran his hands all over her.

I closed my eyes, and then I smiled. I could almost feel the smile fading from her face.

"Do you think I care what you believe?"

Miss Krabble trembled slightly. She seemed completely taken aback. She regained control of herself and then reached for her desk. She pulled out a large, black whip and brandished it towards me.

"I'm your teacher!" She screamed. "I went $300,000 into debt to get my degree! You need to show me some respect!"

She cracked it on me, over and over again, as I sat there and took it. The pain was intense- I could feel my body shake with each blow. But I remembered how much pain I had been in the day before, and how quickly it had passed. I endured.

I stared at her as she hit me, over and over again. She hit me, again and again, until she was red in the face and breathing hard.

"Do you think you have power over me?" I asked quietly, as her hand fell. She was sweating, and her entire body was trembling. "Look at you. You can't even make me bleed!"

"Yes- yes I can!"

She grabbed my chair and wheeled me over to the window. The other kids in my class stopped, staring wildly as Miss Krabble grabbed hold of my chair, and with a mighty heave, tipped the entire thing through the window.

I was still chained down to the chair I could not move as my chair tipped over and I fell, straight onto my head.

The Golden Light was rather weak, at first. At first I had been surrounded by complete blackness. But I could see it now, in the distance- glowing brighter and brighter.

When I regained my senses, I was lying in the pool. The Dream Girl was pressed against me, crying softly. The moment I stirred she looked at me, through tear-stained eyes.

"You're awake." She said softly. "I was worried- that you would not."

"I was almost killed." I said slowly. "I… didn't do anything."

"That's right." She said. "You didn't do anything wrong."

"No… I didn't do anything to defend myself."

She fell silent at this. She looked at me rather intently.

"I'm being abused because society allows it." I said. "I can't allow this to continue."

"You aren't going to!" She said. She pressed herself against me and held me tightly. "You're going to fight, and grow stronger, after you recover!"

I shifted about in the pool of water. My injuries were fading fast.

"I need to be able to break those chains." I said, my voice firm. "I can't allow something like this to happen again. I need to defend myself from those people."

The Dream Girl looked at me with sad eyes, still wet with tears. She gave me a small nod.

"Yes." She said. "The situation is far more dire than even I had feared. Once your wounds have healed fully- we will begin."

I nodded, wincing. I was in so much pain- especially in the neck- that it would take quite a lot of soaking before I could start training again.

“I need to start now.”

She looked at me intently.

“I have to do it now.” I insisted. “I have to protect myself. You saw what happened-“

“You have to heal.” She stressed.

“I can do both.” I said.

She hesitated, staring down at me. I was not deterred.

“You can teach me to hurt people- can’t you?”

“Yes. What you want is to force your Dream into the real world. You have already been doing so subconsciously- you have been learning new skills and recovering from your injuries as you sleep. But to truly unleash your dreams into the world you must begin doing so consciously- while you’re awake.”

“My dreams…” I murmured. “What… are my dreams?”

She smiled.

“I am made up of your dreams.” She said warmly. “I represent what you want must of all- to be loved, and cherished, and supported in everything you do. Someday I will take on a new form. That is the day you will find a new dream.”

“You speak as if I will someday find someone who loves me.”

“You will.” She assured me. “Never forget that- no matter what happens, you must not forget that you are a good person, who wants nothing but the best for those around him.”

I could feel the golden light ebbing away.

“Remember…” She said softly. “Your Dreams.”

“It’s a miracle!” A voice was saying, as I shifted back and forth. “His neck was- it was broken!”

The man was beside himself. I shifted about on the hospital bed as the Nurse leaned into me and held me.

“Can you speak?” She asked softly. She was trying to mask her amazement under a veneer of being professional.

“Yeah.” I said. “Where am I?”

She looked at me rather intently. She did not answer- she seemed to be trying to find the words of how to answer me. The doctor was rocking back and forth just behind her.

“It’s a miracle.” The doctor said. “I performed a miracle…” He was trembling slightly, as he stared intently at me. “I’m… going to be famous…”

“Do you remember what happened?” The nurse asked me kindly, as she leaned in closer to me. She was wearing a very pleasant scent of perfume. It was kind of strong, but it helped me regain my senses.

“My teacher threw me through the window while I was chained to my desk.”

She pursed her lips. I knew instantly that she didn’t believe me.

“That was probably just a dream.” She said. “The Principal reported that you fell after climbing out the window.”

I very quickly tried to correct this.

“That isn’t what-“

“It’s alright, it’s alright.” She said soothingly, as she grabbed my hands. “Just focus on getting better for now, alright?”

“But I-“

I already felt perfectly normal. I felt my heart harden. The school had covered up what had happened. I couldn’t stand for this.

“No, I was thrown out by my teacher.” I said firmly.

The Nurse looked at me. I could tell she didn’t believe me- but she was listening at any rate.

“Could you at least make an official note about it?”

“Of course.” She said brightly. I wasn’t sure if it would actually happen, but at this stage I could do nothing else.

“Could you help me up?”

“No, no, you need more rest.” She said, firmly. “No- don’t even think about-“

I sat up and slid out of bed. She stared at me, open mouthed, as I stretched.

“How- did you?”

“It’s a miracle.” The doctor said. “A miracle. I performed… a miracle.”

He was staring at me rather intently. The nurse whirled on him. She was angry- and I found myself rather thinking that she was rather cute when she was angry.

“Doctor, this isn’t about you!” She said. “Help me stop him! Please.” She added the last bit as if she were almost certain that he would not agree to help.

The doctor looked at her, and then shook his head.

“No… we need to report this.” He said. “I’m… going to be famous… the Miracle Doctor…” He did not move as I began to walk.

“Doctor, the Patient-“

I was already at the door, but the nurse was quick to cut me off.

“Please wait.” She said. “You were seriously hurt- rest awhile, alright? We need to talk about what happened to you.”

I already felt perfectly rested- the time spent in my Dream had seen to that. But I didn’t necessarily know what I wanted to do next- I saw no reason not to cooperate with her. Especially since she had agreed to report why I had been hospitalized to begin with.

I laid back down and began to talk:

“My parents signed an agreement with the school that they could do whatever they like to me to keep me under control. I was chained up in the classroom, and then shoved out the window.”

Her brow furrowed. She looked genuinely put out.

"You did have abrasions on your-" She began, but the doctor cut her off.

"I already spoke with the school about those. He's a wild child- always out of control. They had to physically restrain him to stop him from hurting the other children."

I lay there on the bed, unmoving, and looked at him. The Nurse looked at me, and all at once she broke.

"I'm calling CPS." She said.

"Oh no you're not." The doctor said, alarmed. "He's my patient- he's my responsibility-" He moved to restrain her, but she having none of it.

"Out of my way, chump!"

She was a small woman, but she pushed past him into the hallway. The doctor looked after her, shocked, and then chased after her, screaming about how he would have her job.

I lay there, alone. I lay there, thinking deeply about what had just happened. The nurse meant well. But the last time CPS had been sent to my parent's house it had been a quick fifteen minute long minute meeting where nothing had happened. I was convinced that this would end the same way.

But still, I was grateful to her: I was far from where I wanted to be in life, but the realization that someone had taken my situation seriously was encouraging. This was how it would all start: my dream was starting to become a reality. But I couldn't stop here- the doctor had said that the school had claimed that it had been my fault that I had fallen. So I needed to find a way to prove that wasn't true, before they could head me off.

I couldn't decide how best to do that though. The Nurse had told me that I needed to rest- and so that is what I did. I lay on the bed and tried to relax, my mind racing. I had to pass myself off as well

adjusted as possible, to stop anyone from accusing me of simply making it all up.

It took a long while for the doctor to return to the room- and he was without the Nurse.

“She won’t be working here again.” He told me. “Hallucinations. I’d bet my life on it.”

“Would you bet your degree?”

He froze. His eyes narrowed as I continued to speak, in the most condescending tone I could manage.

“Maybe you should go back to school.” I said. “And learn about this thing called the Hippocratic Oath.”

“Listen here you little shit-“

He stopped himself, and took a deep breath.

“I saved your life.” He said, through clenched teeth. “You need to show me some respect.”

“You didn’t do shit. You’re going to put me back into danger.”

“Ridiculous.” He sneered. “Don’t go traipsing around on rooftops and nothing like this will ever happen again.”

“I was pushed off.”

“Ridiculous.” He said again. “I have dozens of eyewitnesses among the staff- and the students. Not one corroborates your absurd claim.”

He was trying to gaslight me: I knew the staff were terrified of Principal Mann and knew better than to report any misconduct in his school, and the students would be forced into silence out of fear of ending up like me.

I felt myself becoming angry: Not just for my own sake, but for those others who were at risk.

“We’re in danger!” I shouted at him.

He leaned forward and held me down before I could move.

“I can see why they say you’re dangerous.” He hissed. “Nurse!”

A nurse- not the one I had seen when I had awoke, a different one- came in with some straps, and tied me down to the bed. She was a professional- she had worked with dangerous patients before.

"Overly aggressive… delusions of persecution… yes." The doctor said, as he examined his chart. "I daresay his mind was scrambled upon impact."

"There are no outward signs of damage though." The nurse noted, as she examined me closely. She seemed to take the doctor's opinions very seriously and did not think to question his credentials or his diagnosis.

"Perhaps a psychological issue then." He said. "Even my miracles couldn't save his broken mind."

"I want a real doctor." I complained. The man raised his hand and hit me.

"Doctor!" The Nurse said, scandalized. She instinctively leaned over to protect me.

"He's violent, unhinged… and delusional. He needs to be locked up!" The Doctor grabbed my bed and began to wheel my out of the room: I lay there, strapped down barely able to move as the nurse followed behind him, pleading.

"We need a more thorough diagnosis!" She said. "We can't just- lock him in isolation!"

"You haven't heard the first thing about this kid, Nurse." The doctor said gruffly. "He will require extensive treatment, and examination… His parents will have to pay hundreds of thousands of dollars in treatment, if they hope for him to live a normal life."

I laughed.

The doctor turned around to look at me. He looked puzzled.

"What is it?"

"You haven't billed my parents yet?" I asked. He hesitated, his brow furrowed.

“What do you-“

“They won’t pay.” I said. “They will never pay.”

“Of course they will.” The Doctor said. “They have to! You’re their son!”

He looked nervous for a second. He glanced at the Nurse, and without a second thought she dipped away. She picked up a phone on the side of the wall and made a quick call. Her face began to pale during the conversation.

“They’ve fled the country!” She shouted.

“What?” The doctor shouted. He looked furious. “But we have their son!”

They looked down on me in horror.

“He can’t pay!” The nurse said, horrified.

“Nurse!” The doctor said.

In a flash the nurse was on me: She grabbed the bed and pushed it to the window. With one heave, she shoved it out, and I landed on the concrete, rolled down the road, and down the street.

Cars honked at me as I tried to swerve back and forth. I was still strapped down, and couldn’t leave the bed, but I could adjust my weight and get the bed to shift in certain directions. More than one person screamed at me as I shot past them- and it was not until I hit a curb that the bed toppled over, snapping the bindings as it fell.

It was a much better fall than the last one: I got to my feet and glanced around. Dozens of cars were blaring their horns at me, and more than one person had gotten out to come after me.

I stood tall and pounded my chest.

“I’m fine!” I called out to the crowd as they advanced upon me, sneering.

People were glowering at me, and looked murderous. I stood my ground, glaring intently at them with all of the strength I could muster.

If only I could stop them.

If only I could- do anything.

Would I have to stand up to all of these people, too?

I stood my ground as they advanced, my anger mounting. They didn't care that I had been strapped down- they didn't care that I was scared and terrified. They didn't care about me at all.

All they cared about was that they had been mildly inconvenienced by me. They advanced, fists and teeth clenched, and before long someone kicked out at me, sending me sprawling.

The man who had kicked me smiled as he drew a knife. I looked at him and felt my mind go blank. This had gone on long enough.

I stood up and straightened myself, staring intently at him.

"Alright you pussy." I said. "Give it your best shot!"

The man looked taken aback for a second- but when he remembered that he was bullying a kid he regained his courage. He raised the knife and brought it down on top of me. I dodged out of the way, grabbed his arm, and bit him.

"Aaaaaaargh!"

I clenched as hard as I could- I had intentionally gone after the forearm that was holding the knife: my hands were wrapped around his, and were doing everything I could to rip it away from him.

He was way bigger and stronger than I was- and he wasn't alone. Angry outraged shouts filled the air behind him, and before long I was ripped away from him so roughly that my teeth drew blood.

I was thrown to the ground, and soon I could hear a police officer over the shouting loudly.

"Let me at the little shit!"

My face was on the concrete as the officer kneeled downward, pressing his knee against my neck.

"You think violence solves problems, boy?" he said.

“Well it certainly saved my life just now.”

He pressed on my neck harder.

“You should have come to an adult.” He said. “You should have called the cops. We would have protected you.”

I laughed so hard I choked. The cop pressed his knee deeper onto my neck.

“You’re in big trouble.” He said. “The insurance companies are going to make you pay for all of the damage you caused today-“

“The hospital did it.”

“Don’t lie to me.”

“Okay, fine.” I screwed up my face. “Your Mother told me your dick is the smallest she’s ever had.”

He grabbed me by the hair and slammed my face into the concrete.

“Give me one reason why I shouldn’t just kill you right now.”

“I’m a kid who hasn’t gone to trial.”

Someone in the crowd stepped forward, and raised his hand. He was an older man with a long white beard and a black bowler hat atop his head.

“I’m a judge. Fuck him.”

The cop reached for his gun and drew it, pointing it right at my head. I glared at him.

“I’m warning you-“ I began.

The cop chuckled.

“Warning me?” He asked, as he shoved the gun into my throat. “I’m the one with the power here.”

I lunged forward and bit the gun, making sure to stay away from the barrel. The cop swore, yanking it out of my mouth- and then accidentally shot into the crowd.

“Aggggh!”

The Judge that had spoken out staggered backward, blood spurting out of his chest. I let go of the gun quickly.

"Look what you did!" I snarled at the cop.

"I- no!" He said. "You- you did that! You did!"

But the crowd didn't quite agree- they looked down right murderous as they advanced on the two of us.

"No- stop-"

The cop was ripped off of me, and the crowd began to attack him. I barely had the chance to slip away- in the fury of the moment, no one seemed to remember that I was the one that they had been going after to begin with.

I found a nice, quiet spot in a nearby alley to rest. No one was around, so I sat and decided to compose myself. It had been a nightmare ever since I had woken up. Before anything else, I needed a safe space to sit and think about what I needed to do next. It would only be a matter of time until I was attacked again.

I was thankful that my parents were out of the country: They couldn't come after me. But the downside to that was that I was now a ward of the state- a child on the run. So I was now a target of the police, and anyone else that I met on the road.

What did I want to do? What did I want to accomplish? I didn't want to survive- I wanted to thrive. If the schools didn't come after me- if they couldn't come after me- I would go to them.

I steeled myself and stood up. I stepped past an old bearded man who began screaming at me and walked down the road. I had no idea where I was- but soon enough I figured it out.

The door was closed and locked when I got there. I knocked on it, and an old man who worked as a janitor glanced up to look at me, slowly raised his middle finger, smirked, and then turned away.

I looked at the lock, and kicked it, shattering the glass. I reached around and unlocked the door.

Immediately the Janitor was screaming at me.

“You can’t do that!”

“You didn’t open the door.” I told him. I ignored his screams as I climbed up the stairs to my classroom.

I could hear loud noises and cheers from the classroom as I approached. When I stepped inside I could see the entire class was partying. Cans of pop laying sprawled on the floor as kids danced furiously on top of the desks as loud rap music blasted across the room. Miss Krabble was sitting at her desk a box of pizza in front of her, as an R-rated movie played on the project just behind her.

The instant I stepped into the room everyone fell silent. Even the music itself fell silent- before starting up again for the next, quieter track.

Miss Krabble stared at me as the movie played behind her. She looked completely taken aback.

“Get out.” She rasped.

“Lame party.” I said. I stepped up to the desk and sat down, looking around at everyone. “The one at the hospital was way cooler.”

Miss Krabble stood up. She glowered at me as she clenched her hands into fists.

“I’m calling the police.” She said.

“Sit down you dumb broad.” I said. She stared at me, her lips tight.

“What the fuck did you just say to me?” She whispered.

“I called you a dumb broad.” I said. “One that almost got away with putting me in the hospital. Almost."

She bristled. Her hands tightened. Before she could respond, however, the door to the classroom opened again, and in walked Principal Mann, accompanied by school security. Security was heavily armed wtih giant machine guns that would not have looked out of place in a war zone. Mann looked at me with great contempt- his hands were clasped behind his back. I knew he too was armed.

“Why are you here? We both know that you don’t want to learn.” He sneered.

“You don’t know anything about me.” I said coolly.

“I’ll see you expelled.” Mann said, his voice tense. “You have no right to be here.”

He gestured to the security team and they advanced towards me. I did not move as they raised the butts of their guns and brought them down on my head.

CRACK!

I fell to the floor, dazed, as Mann stood over me, glaring down at me as I struggled to push myself up.

“We hate you.” He whispered. “We don’t want anything to do with you.”

He nodded at the security goon again and he brought up the gun again, smashing it across my head.

The Golden Light enveloped me immediately. Once again I was in the grassy field with the Dream Girl, and once again we were staring out over the horizon.

“They’re going to chain you up again.” She said to me gently.

“I know.” I said. “I need to break these chains.”

She nodded, and once more I found myself tearing at the chains- tearing at them to break. Once more they failed to budge.

“What am I missing?” I asked her, frustrated. “What more do I need to do?”

She looked at me and said nothing.

When I awoke, I found myself hanging in a dark, empty room. My hands and feet were bound by the silver chains as I swung back and forth.

Theodore Mann was looking at me.

“I suppose you want to know just what I’m going to do with you.” He said. “Well, I’ll have you know that no one knows that you’re here. I have not reported you to the police, or to your parents. As far as anyone outside of this building knows- you have disappeared from the public eye.”

He bent down under his desk and brought out a massive trident. He stroked it gingerly, checking the pointed ends to make sure they were all sharp.

“I have always hated you little shits.” He said to me. “I detest children- I became an educator just so that I can torture and destroy them. But unfortunately- usually the parents got in the way.”

He gave me a look.

“But your parents understood.” He said. “They know what a burden you really are on society, and supported me in every little thing I ever wanted to do to you. A world without children would be a paradise- one that I truly hope I will be the one to help make.”

He stood up, still carrying the trident, and walked around his desk, eyeing me carefully.

“Someday we will fully eliminate the need for reproduction.” He said. “We will be able to spawn fully adult humans through cloning technology- and eventually we will conquer death and become immortal. Truly, then, we will be as gods and can do as we like with the world- without having to worry about the crotch monkeys that will come after us.”

He raised the trident and stabbed at me. I gasped as the tip of the blade drew blood.

“I have you at my mercy.” Principal Mann said quietly. “Now that I can do whatever I like with you- I truly don’t know where I should begin.”

He traced the tip of the trident along my chest.

“Killing you would not be fun at all.” He said. “No… I will make my torture of you very slow and painful. I will keep you alive for years, if

I can. Whenever the other children outside this room head you scream- they will do whatever it takes to not be like you."

I grinned.

"I guess I'll just not scream."

He stabbed me again, and I grit my teeth, refusing to make a sound as the three prongs entered my stomach.

"You are so obstinate." The Principal said. "You gain nothing by not screaming- in fact, doing so would do nothing but help you. Why do you resist? Do you truly hate me that much?"

"I have pride in myself."

"Pride? You have pride in being a useless eater, a waste of space?"

I could feel a fire burning within me.

"No." I said. "I have pride in my dreams."

I yanked on the chains- and they shattered. Principal Mann recoiled slightly as I hit the ground. The broken chains still dangled off of my wrists as I raised my hand and brought it down- cracking the whip like chain across his face.

Principal Mann cried out as the chain hit him. He fell backwards, sprawling across the floor as I raised the chain again for another hit. Immediately his attitude shifted- he began to tremble.

"N-no!" He begged me, as he held up his hand to stop me. "Please- if you hit me you'll be just like me!"

I hit him again. He cried out in pain, begging me to stop, but all I could think about were all of the times he had ignored my pleas to him to stop hurting me. I felt nothing but a cold satisfaction at seeing his body go limp, his face beaten and bloody.

I grimaced, rubbing my wrist. It was red and swollen from being held aloft for so long. I was rather weak and tired- I had to get home and rest. I would not be coming back.

There was no door to the room- instead a ladder leading upward to a small entry in the floor was the only exit. I grimaced as I grabbed

hold of the rungs of the ladder and hoisted myself up. I pushed the door open and found myself under the floor of Principal Mann's office.

"Is that you, Theodore?" Miss Krabble called. She was lying on the desk in nothing but her underwear and high heels as she stared up at the ceiling. "You sure took your time with him, didn't you?"

She raised a cigarette to her lips and blew smoke into the room, kicking out her long bare legs over the side of the desk. I hesitated, debating what to do. I hated her more than almost anyone- but she was not a direct threat to me right now, and likely never would be again. Attacking her now served no purpose- so I chose not to do it.

I walked past her and to the door. She looked up, surprised, and then shouted.

"You brat!"

I opened the door just as she slid off the desk and began chasing me, her high heels slipping off of her feet.

"You little SHIT!"

I reached the front door and burst out of it. Miss Krabble was shouting at me as I hit the pavement- and she even followed me out of the door.

"You bastard!" She screamed at me. "Get back here!"

I ignored her: I was free. I hit the sidewalk, and then the road, and then went beyond the road into someone's yard. I jumped the fence there and then found myself on another street.

I had to make my way home. I was exhausted. My parents had fled the country, so I wouldn't have to worry about them today. I would eat whatever they had lying around, sleep, and then plan my next move.

It was a very quick journey back. I occasionally saw Miss Krabble, still in her underwear, patrolling the streets in her sportscar, trying to find me. But it was fairly easy for me to stay out of sight whenever

this happened by ducking off of the sidewalk, and soon enough I found myself at home.

I didn't even eat- I just found my bed and just collapsed.

The Golden Light came, and the Dream Girl looked concerned at me.

"What now?"

I cupped my hand in my chin. "I need to get ready for whatever's going to come next." I said. "I need… hmmm… I'm not sure what I need."

"You'll find it." The Dream Girl promised. "How about we review some of your school lessons? Some of it may be important."

We spent a very pleasant evening together- The Dream Girl managed to get across more in eight hours than Miss Krabble had all year. I felt my mind positively bursting with information when she set down her book.

"You should rest." She advised me. "A little bit of a soak will do you good."

And so I found myself sliding back into the pool- the Dream Girl sitting by poolside and singing a tune I could not name or place. We only spent half an hour or so truly unwinding- but it meant the world to me.

When I awoke, I still felt slightly woozy. I had not spent nearly enough time in the pool. My wrists were feeling better- but they were far from what they should have been. I wondered why I had not thought of taking my lessons while I was healing in the pool.

I made something for myself and sat around the house. It was strangely quiet. I was so used to my parents screaming at me that not having them here felt wrong somehow. It bothered me. It got me thinking about what problems them not being here would cause me.

I was still a minor- so they couldn't legally kick me out. But since I was living here alone now I would need to find a way to pay for the bills. I had no idea how much they were or what I would have to

pay- but I felt pretty strongly that I only needed to pay for the basic utilities. It was my parent's house, after all, and I wouldn't be on the hook for taxes or anything like that.

In other words, I was living on my own right now and needed to get a job. I threw on a bright blue blazer, cleaned my shoes, combed my hair, and set out to look around.

I found the closest gas station.

"I would like to apply for a job please." I said at the counter.

The woman behind the counter sneered at me.

"Everything's online!" She snapped.

I whipped out my phone, never breaking eye contact with her as I quickly applied my resume to the job portal and hit submit.

"Not a problem." I said. "I've just applied. May I speak with your manager?"

The woman reached under the counter and pulled out a shotgun.

"I am the manager." She sneered. "I don't hire people who come in here asking for work. I only hire people with twenty years experience in the industry."

"I do have experience." I said smoothly. "If you look at my resume, you'll see that I-"

She pulled the trigger on the shotgun and it went off. It flew past me, through the glass door, and into the gas dispenser. Gas began to leak out onto the concrete.

"Leave!" She screamed at me. "Now!"

She fired at me again as I stepped out. I narrowly got out of the way when the entire gas station exploded. The woman's burnt up corpse shot into the air and exploded into ash.

I wondered what could have made her so desperate to not hire someone who simply wanted a job.

I spent all day going to these sorts of places, asking for work. When I was told that everything was online, I corrected them immediately

by telling them that I had already applied online. When they got angry with me and tried to tell me that they wanted people with experience, I was very quick to emphasize that I had more experience working than anyone else in the building.

My parents had raised me like a slave- so I had extensive experience in pretty much every field imaginable. I was a gourmet chief, an accountant that could manage finances, I could do inventory, I could do customer service, I could sell things, I could run my own business.

"No you can't." The manager at Beef Burger sneered at me. "Otherwise you wouldn't be begging me for a job!"

I looked at him rather intently and then turned around and walked home. I got my parent's grill out, some meat from a locally sourced farm, and dragged it out to his restaurant. I set it up front and sold burgers at a fraction of the price that he did- with better ingredients and service.

The manager was furious.

"You can't do that!" He screamed at me, stamping his feet. "You don't have a license for that!"

He called the cops, who arrived very quickly. They tried my burgers, declared them delicious, but would not allow me to continue running my business because I had no right to set up a food stand out front like this.

"We're going to have to fine you, sir." The cop said.

"I have burgers." I said.

The cops looked at each other and shrugged.

"They're good." He said. "We'll let it slide this time, alright? But make sure you have the proper licensing next time."

They were shockingly supportive. They thanked me for the burgers and promised that they would be the first in line once I set up a proper restaurant and left me to take the grill back home. The people who had loved my burgers were furious- but the manager

was smirking at me as I walked away. As far as he was concerned, he had won- even though he had done absolutely nothing to improve his business or service.

I came away self-assured though- I was already better at this than anyone else in the city. All of that talk about experience was nothing but bluster from mediocre people who were desperate to maintain their own tepid place in society.

I spent that night researching how to start my business. There were a lot of roadblocks- my age and assets, for instance- but I already had the skillset to succeed. When I went to bed that night, I felt a bit more reassured.

"I'm not sure that you're in much danger as you might think." The Dream Girl said. She was kicking the water in the pool with her bare toes, watching the water swirl in circles.

"I'm not in danger now- but I will be." I told her. I could feel the warm water washing over me, and my fatigue melting away. "I need to be prepared for whatever comes our way."

"You've already gone over all of the material you learned in school- and you have proven that you can work any kind of job. What else do you want?"

I closed my eyes, thinking deeply.

"Teach me how to defend myself." I said. She looked at me rather intently.

"You are still terrified of the adults around you."

"I would be insane not to be." I said. "After the way I was treated today I need to defend myself- against whatever comes my way."

She nodded, once.

"A sword is meant to defend- not to kill." She said. "You want to learn to fight for the right reasons- to preserve your way of life, and your own happiness.

She gestured to me and I stood up. She led me by the hand to the nearby field.

“In dreams you can do anything.” She said quietly. “But how do you make your dreams into reality?”

“Through sheer faith and hard work.”

“Yes.” She said. “Nothing you have ever wanted is unobtainable- it was simply denied to you by others. Your childhood was taken from you by your parents, the schools took away your freedom. And the economy took away your pursuit of happiness.”

“No.” I corrected her. “I’m still young- I fought for my freedom, and I will make my way in the world- no matter the state of it.”

“Well said.” The Dream Girl said, sounding pleased. “Yes… you have been denied these things by others, so now you must learn to take them for yourself.”

I nodded, my expression set.

“For now, we will focus on Dreams.” She said. “Have you noticed that, whatever you learn here applies in the real world?”

“Yes.”

“That is because what you want, more than anything, is to succeed in the real world- you have suffered so greatly that you have no interest in engaging in petty fantasies. No- what you desire is very real. And you will do anything to obtain it.”

“Anything.” I repeated.

“Anything.” She said. She smiled at me, and wiggled her body a bit. “You learned to break chains- specifically those steel ones that your teachers used to hold you down. Now it is time to develop that skill into something new. Something you can defend yourself with.”

I closed my eyes.

“Force…” I said slowly. “I used Force.”

I held out my hand and imagined a chain there. I imagined it shattering in my mind. A golden glow began to emanate from my hand.

“That’s it.” The Dream Girl said, sounding pleased. “Like any skill you must develop it to the best of your abilities- you did not simply just learn to break your chains with this power. You accomplished so much more.”

“I learned the Power of Dreams.” I said.

“Yes!” She said, beaming. “As long as you keep dreaming- you will always succeed!”

We spent the rest of the evening preparing how to use my abilities. I had destroyed the chains by exerting a kind of ‘Force’ over them to snap them. The Force that emanated from my body whenever I tried unleashing it was gold in color, and a sort of ethereal power emanated from it.

“It’s Dream Energy.” The Dream Girl told me, as she watched me glow. “You have to give it form- to unleash it. Otherwise it’s just an idea in your mind.”

I raised my hand. A bolt of gold shot out and slammed into the tree, shattering the bark.

“That’s it!” She said, clapping.

“Can I do it in real life now?” I asked her.

“No… not yet.” She said. “It’s harder to do in real life, remember? But as long as you stay committed-“

I nodded, my expression set. That was true- I had been training to break the chains for a couple of nights before I had finally done it. Things were far easier to do in the Dream World, but not nearly as rewarding.

“I’ll practice when I wake up.” I promised. I faltered. I remembered how, in the past, I did not even remember much of these dreams when I awoke.

But the Dream Girl smiled at me reassuringly.

“Come on.” She said gently. “Best to rest in the pool as you wake.”

We spent the rest of the night in the pool- simply sitting there. She spoke very little- choosing instead to sing softly to herself as she washed her hair. I couldn't stop staring at her. She seemed to enjoy my attention- she kept casting looks at me, as she combed through her long blonde hair with her fingers.

I woke up in my bed feeling better than I had in quite a long while. I made myself breakfast and worried about what would come next. It was only a matter of time until the school came for me- and got the police involved.

Despite that, though, the lights were still on, and there was plenty of food so today I felt like I could take it easy. I made breakfast, did the dishes afterward, and then sat down in the living room to plan my next move.

It was as the Dream Girl said: I needed to find a way to defend myself against those who were working against me. I had barely managed to survive my encounter with Principal Mann, and I was confident that I could do so again against new threats- but… the lack of having a job and stability concerned me. I wasn't sure how much longer I could stay here, in my parent's house before they returned or something else happened.

I needed something more stable. But the house was too comfortable to leave behind. I desperately needed somewhere else to fall back on- but there was nowhere for me to go.

I made dinner, and then puzzled over the problem as I ate. I was comfortable here- I didn't want to leave. And yet, because of my parents, I would inevitably have to. It was very frustrating- I was already running out of time.

I didn't want to go to bed- I felt like I hadn't yet figured out the problem- but when the Golden Light washed over me I felt a little bit at peace.

I spent a lot of time learning more Dreams, but in between sessions we sat and spoke about what to do next. I felt the need to plan for the future more than anything else.

“The important thing is to keep on moving.” The Dream Girl said. “No matter what happens-“

She gave a surprised start. The Golden Light faded away in an instant. I was ripped from my dream into the real world, with a resounding crash.

“There you are you little SHIT.”

My Dad’s hands were wrapped around my throat- I could barely move. I desperately tried to fight back, kicking and screaming as Dad dragged me out of bed.

“How dare you ruin our vacation!”

He slammed me against the wall so hard that it broke through the drywall. He pulled me back and slammed me back again, and I ended up through the wall, out into the hallway, and rolling down the stairs.

I hit the bottom of the stairs and winced from the pain. My Dad stood at the top of the stairs for a brief moment, looking down at me, before taking a flying leap, his elbow raised.

I kicked myself off from him as he hit the ground, and rolled. I got to my feet as he lunged at me again, tackling me to the ground.

“You- ungrateful-“

I struggled in vain as he began to beat the shit out of me. After bloodying my face he went for a hold on my arms-

CRACK

He went for my legs

CRACK CRACK

I was sobbing when he reached for my last limb. He looked at it, and then at my face.

“You need the one arm to do your chores.” He growled. He released me and I collapsed, sobbing pitifully.

My Mom came down the stairs, still crying.

“Why is he such a piece of shit?” She sobbed. “Where did we go wrong?”

“We were too easy on him.” Dad growled, staring down at me with contempt. “He thinks that he can just ruin our vacation like this… it’s disgusting.”

He kicked me in the stomach again, hard, and I reeled.

“You think you can just skip school?” He demanded. “You think you can just sleep your life away?”

“Sleep is for the weak.” Mom said, composing herself softly. “You need to be work work working to provide for your poor parents, who have given you your very life.”

I was too stunned to say anything. I lay there as they glowered at me.

“The measures taken by the school weren’t extreme enough.” Mom said. “If this keeps up- he’ll be sent to prison.”

“I hope they give him the Death Penalty.” Dad snapped. Mom nodded, her expression set.

“I should have aborted him.” She said quietly. “Oh, I knew I shouldn’t have had him!”

She looked despondent for a second and sniffed. My Dad glowered at me.

“Do you have anything to say for yourself, you little shit?” He asked.

“Like what?”

“How about an apology?” he demanded. “You’ve ruined our lives!”

I found myself hesitating. They were right- they were the only reason I was alive now.

But then I could feel a great fire well up within me- I owed nothing to these people. Loyalty was a two way street. They demanded respect from me, but did nothing to deserve it.

“I’m sorry- that my parents are so useless.” I said.

My Dad's eyes widened at me. I grimaced, as I used my one good hand to prop myself up.

"A real parent- would have supported me." I rasped. "But you're the problem. You always have been."

"Shut up!"

He kicked me in the face, and I went sprawling backwards. I stared up at the ceiling. I felt more sure than ever that what I believed was true- I was not the problem here.

I gasped in pain as I rolled over as my Dad advanced on me, and wrapped his arms around my neck. He lifted me off the ground and glared at me.

"Give me one good reason why I shouldn't break your neck right now." He growled.

I gave him my best glare.

"I'm your son."

He bared his teeth at me as his fingers squeezed around my neck. I could feel myself beginning to black out. Soon enough- I would be back in the dream world.

I could not go back. Not yet. Not until I finished my business here.

I raised my one unbroken arm. A brilliant golden light began to emanate from it- and I brought it down.

CRASH!

My Dad screamed in fear and pain as he released me. The sheer force behind my blow sent him flying through the air, through the wall and into the street. My Mother screamed in fear as I hit the ground with a thud. My legs were so broken that I could not stand.

"Did you think… you could push me around forever?" I asked her coldly. She froze, staring down at me.

"You're- you're a monster!" She screeched. "This isn't right! We're your parents! We own you!"

I coughed blood. I could feel my vision fading fast. I had not trained to recover my body in the waking world as I had in sleep- so I didn't know how to do it. Although the Golden Light still enveloped me completely, I could not force myself to stand. All I could do now- was raise my hand and fire off a bolt of Dreams.

Mom screamed as the ball of energy hit her. She went flying back, slamming into the chandelier before falling back down with a sickening crunch. I lay there, breathing hard, as I looked at all of the damage I had caused.

I closed my eyes, and tried to force myself into sleep.

Somehow- I managed it. I was in the golden pool again. This time The Dream Girl was frantically whispering in my ear:

"You have to FOCUS." She clarified. "You have to-"

I was awoken again by the sounds of an ambulance. My legs and arms had barely had any time to heal before emergency workers came into the house, looking around.

"The kid's awake! What happened!"

I blinked at him.

"My parents started beating me and then-"

"No, you idiot. We don't care about you. What we care about is the house and your folks."

I blinked again.

"Too stupid to answer a simple question, huh?" The EMT sneered. "Well. We'll get to the bottom of this matter shortly. Don't worry your stupid little head about it."

He smacked me in the head with his open palm before standing up.

"Leave the kid here!" He called, waving his hand. "The parents need help more!"

I lay there and watched as my parents- who were far less banged up than I was- were hoisted onto stretchers and carried out to the

ambulance. The man in charge oversaw all of this, and returned to me, still sneering.

"Remember anything useful yet?" He asked.

I spit at him. He raised his leg and kicked at me. I took the blow to the face and reeled.

"Don't disrespect me, boy. Your parents lives are in my hands."

He grinned down at me as I glowered up at him.

"Without me they would die." He said. "And who would take care of poor little useless you then, hm?"

"I can take care of myself."

"Can you?" The EMT sneered. "By the looks of things you can't even stand up on your own. Without my help you will never walk again. Kiss my shoe and worship me- I am your own personal Jesus Christ."

He stuck his foot forward- the same one that had just kicked me, and stopped just in front of my face. I stared at it. My first instinct was to bite it. But it dawned on me that I could do something even worse.

The Golden Light began to emanate off of my body. The man looked at me, frowned, and then towards the ceiling.

"Where is that light coming from?"

As he was looking around, my arms and legs began to force themselves back together. My bones mended and folded back into place. I felt myself float upward, and then land on my feet.

The EMT glanced down at me, just in time for my fist to hit him in the face.

POW.

The man went flying back. He let out a scream as he hit the wall.

The Golden Light continued washing over me as I stood up, gasping in pain. I had barely managed it- every inch of my body was screaming at me to stop. But I could also feel my body rapidly undergoing the healing process. The splintered bone forced itself

back into place as muscle and skin began to reattach themselves- stronger than they had been before.

The EMT sat up, rubbing his chin.

"What the hell was that?"

He stared at me as if he hadn't seen me before. He had been very bold and confident when he thought he had the upper hand- but now he was shaking.

"No- no please don't hurt me." He said.

It struck me then just how pathetic these people were when someone stood up to them. I somehow knew that everyone else I had ever met would behave the exact same way. I felt a twinge of fear- that someday, I too would become like this.

I focused my energy further. More golden light poured from me as my wounds and injuries melted away. I raised my hand and blasted him with a bolt of dream energy. He let out a scream as the explosion hit him.

He was shaking again.

"If you kill me- you'll be just like me!"

That again? I thought with disdain.

"I'm nothing like you." I said with disgust. I took no pleasure in what I had to do to those who had wronged me. I hit him again with another blast, and he exploded into pieces. Never again would the man ruin lives.

My legs buckled somewhat, and I winced. I focused my energy on healing my legs as I sat back down, wincing.

The EMTs returned to their business and before long left me alone. I lay in the ruined house, my mind racing.

My wounds were healing- but at a very slow pace. I could still feel my bones mending back together- I had forced myself upright out of sheer force of will. Were there limits to my dreams? Could I not just simply force myself to feel better?

I remembered how the Dream Girl had warned me that over time I would have new dreams. I wondered if that was what she meant. I had wanted to heal myself, and now I simply wanted to heal myself faster. I felt ashamed- I needed to be more grateful for what I had.

I took a deep breath and tried to relax. I felt very tired- exerting so much Dream Energy had worn me out. I collapsed onto the ground and tried once again to enter the pool.

"You're going to kill yourself!" The Dream Girl snapped at me. She shoved me into the pool before I could even react, and before long I could feel the warm water around me.

She looked agitated and frantic- I felt the same way. I was still on edge after all that had happened. The moment my parents were physically able to come after me, I would again be in danger.

"What do I do now?" I asked her frantically, as the golden light began to rise upward from the pool. I could feel my exhaustion melting away, but my fear was that it wouldn't be good enough.

"I-I don't know!" The Dream Girl wailed. "What- what's going to happen to us?"

She was trembling. I felt the need to reassure her.

"We'll be fine." I told her.

"But-"

"I'll figure it out." I said. "Get in the pool."

She looked at me with her bright blue eyes and, still trembling, slid into the pool at my side. We sat there for several moments in silence. My mind was racing.

"I can fight." I said quietly. "If I can fight the school- if I fight my parents- I can fight anyone that comes at me. Calm down. I'll do this."

She stopped trembling. She looked at me, looking rather frightened, as I allowed the pool to wash away my weariness and pain. Over time, however, she began to look more composed.

“Yes…” She said quietly. “You’ll take care of it, won’t you?”

She sat in the pool, deep in thought. “You’re becoming better at making your Dreams reality.” She said slowly. “But you cannot destroy the dreams of others.”

I looked at her. She looked despondent.

“No matter how powerful your dream is- you will clash with the dreams of others.” She said. “And those clashes- will end poorly for everyone.”

“That’s the way of the world.” I answered. “I fight so that I may someday live in peace- but that peace will not last. The past two days have been wonderful. Someday… I want to experience those kinds of days again.”

She looked at me, and then nodded once.

“You will do whatever it takes.” She said tonelessly. “I know that very well. I wish- our perhaps, Our Wish- is that it could be different.”

I leaned back in the pool and glanced up at the sky.

“Tell me.” I said. “What must I do next?”

She looked down into the window, thinking deeply.

“The world has failed us.” She said tonelessly. “I’m not sure why- or how- but it has, all the same.”

“So I’ll have to change the entire world.” I said slowly. “I can’t just stop at myself.”

She looked at me, and then nodded.

“Yes…” She said softly. “Yes… no one should suffer as you have. As… we have.”

She looked troubled again. “Oh, how you have suffered… when you don’t even understand what you truly want?”

“Perhaps I’m no different from anyone else.” I said tonelessly. “Perhaps they too think that hurting me will bring themselves happiness- that it’s the only way. I don’t believe it is.”

I stood up out of the bath. The Dream Girl looked at me, rather surprised. And then she became stern.

“You have to rest-“

She reached forward and pulled me back down. “You can work when you’re rested.” She told me gingerly. “Please…”

“I can’t stop now.” I told her. “I don’t know what I want.”

“You’ll find it someday.” She insisted. “But for now- you need to think about what I want.”

She held me there and forced me to stay still. I was uneasy, and restless, but she placated me somewhat by reading a book to me aloud. I barely registered what she was reading to me, but it dawned on me on just how much more pleasant the story was than my reality.

“I’ll never live a life like that.”

“That isn’t true.” She insisted. “Have faith in yourself. Be a good person, and love will find you.”

I began to feel myself beginning to awaken. The Dream girl smiled softly and held my hand.

“Until next time…” She said.

I awoke in my parent’s destroyed house, staring up at the ceiling. I sat up, yawned, and collected my thoughts.

I had beat up my parents after they had tried killing me. The EMTs had refused to help me, and in the end had just left me here. No one had come for me in the entire span of time I had been lying here.

The more I thought about it- the more I realized that none of that made any sense. It felt rather like- rather like a nightmare.

“You don’t know it now…” The Dream Girl’s voice said quietly. “But the worst is already over.”

She came out from the shadows of the house and kneeled down before me. She held my hand tightly, glowing in the dark.

I closed my eyes and imagined it. I had defeated my parents- I had defeated the school- I had even stood up to the authorities.

"I don't know if that's true." I said softly. "But all I want now- is to go back to school and live a normal life."

The Dream Girl nodded once, and then took my hands. We looked at each other as the golden light surrounded us both.

"Close your eyes." She said. "And focus."

The golden light exploded around me, and when it faded away I found myself sitting at my desk at school. A woman I had never seen before was leaning over me. I almost gave a small start: it was not Miss Krabble. Or, more accurately, it was not Miss Krabble as I knew her.

"Is something the matter?" The Woman asked. Her voice was soft and reassuring. She was a pleasant woman, not at all like Miss Krabble had been.

"N-nothing… I just zoned out, is all."

"Hmm…" She looked at me rather intently. "If anything's the matter, you can come to me, alright?"

She smiled at me, rather radiantly, and walked to the front of the classroom. The nameplate on the desk read Mrs. Goodman.

"Congratulations." The Dream Girl said quietly. She was sitting at a desk right next to me. "You have conquered the Nightmare."

"What?"

"Please no talking back there." Mrs. Goodman said. The Dream Girl smiled and raised a finger to her lips. I furrowed my brow- a little bit confused as to what had happened. But I resigned myself to my work.

When class ended, Mrs. Goodman held me after class.

"I'm sorry, this won't take long." She said. "You haven't been yourself lately."

I wasn't sure what to say.

"I know you've been working hard ever since you got out from the hospital… you're doing the best you can. But you've been through a lot, and I just wanted you to know that I'm very proud of you. If there's anything I can do for you- please let me know."

I stepped out into the hallway to see the Dream Girl waiting for me. She held a bright yellow lunchbox in her hands.

"Want to have lunch on the roof?"

We weren't supposed to be up there- but the offer was too tempting. We climbed up the side of the building and sat, our legs dangling over the side, as we stared out into the town.

"Congratulations." The Dream Girl said, as she placed a slice of an apple into her mouth. "Theodore Mann was controlling Miss Krabble. The moment you killed him- she moved on, got married, and began to live a happier life. It's over."

It certainly felt so. I felt triumphant, and powerful. I had fought my nightmare and came out on top. And yet…

"Nothing has changed." I said. "Things are good now- but it won't always be this way, will it? This was all just… a happy accident. These good times won't last."

"But things won't always be bad, either." The Dream Girl reminded me. "I want you to remember that."

I sat on the side of the building, overlooking the city. Now that my Nightmare was over- I wasn't quite sure what I wanted to do next.

"You will find new dreams." The Dream Girl told me quietly. "Your suffering has ended- but you have not truly found happiness yet either. You have fought for peace, not for purpose."

"I have no purpose…" I said quietly. "What do I want, truly?"

"I can't answer that for you." The Dream girl said quietly.

"You can help me try." I challenged her.

She laughed. It was a lovely sound.

“Perhaps I can.” She said. “But for now… let us enjoy the peace. Someday… you will dream different dreams.”

Part 2

My school life had radically improved since Mrs. Goodman had come into my life. I began to enjoy school- Mrs. Goodman took the time to check up on me, and ensured that I was on top of all of my studies. And she even helped me start planning for careers and college. I began to really like and appreciate her- but a part of me was beginning to feel guilty.

“I killed Theodore Mann.” I said. “Could he have changed too?”

She nodded. I felt my heart seize up at this- but she leaned over and took my hand.

“He could have.” She said. “He had a choice. He chose this fate the moment he raised his hand against you. Whatever else Miss Krabble was- she was not so set in her ways that she couldn’t change.”

I sat in contemplation for a bit. I had wanted to kill her- but instead, she had changed her for the better.

“Neither path is wrong.” The Dream Girl said gently. “They both had every opportunity to change and become better people- but in the end only Mrs. Goodman did.”

“That doesn’t change the fact that she did me wrong.”

“That doesn’t change the fact that she did change.” The Dream Girl said. “We want people to be good- we want to help people. We want the world to be a good place. But that isn’t always the case. Sometimes we need to put people down- and sometimes the threat of that happening is what causes people to change for the better.”

“Sometimes.” I said. “Not always.”

“There’s no one path to becoming a good person.” The Dream Girl said. “Plenty of people are little monsters when they grow up- and become good people. Plenty of others grow up in ideal situations and behave the exact way they are supposed to- and become

tyrants. But there are others still who are bad all of their lives- and no amount of help or rehabilitation will help them."

"Which one of those am I?" I asked.

She looked surprised by the question but did not answer.

Although Mrs. Goodman was now nice, the rest of the class still tried their hardest to bully me. However, Mrs. Goodman was much better about putting a stop to it. I found that I had to do nothing besides sit in silence as she, for the first time ever, began disciplining other students- including her younger brother Phil.

"This isn't fair!" Phil Krabble whined. "I'm your brother!"

"I told you before the semester started that you would get no special treatment." Goodman said firmly. "I'm telling Mom about this when I get home."

"Waaaah!"

I felt a twinge of relief- I had been getting tired of beating up Phil Krabble every day before and after school for the past year. It was a very pleasant experience to read on the bus as I was driven home. I have recently become enamored with Edgar Allen Poe, and had consumed a large body of his work on my own time.

When the bus stopped in front of my house, all of that came to an end. My parents were waiting for me. Their entire bodies were covered in full length casts, and two burly orderlies stood behind them as they pushed them around in wheelchairs. My heart fell in my chest. I knew it had been coming. My parents had not changed and never would.

"House. Now."

I followed them inside up the ramp that had been placed to accommodate them. When the door slammed shut behind me my parents immediately started screaming.

It wasn't as bad as usual- the orderlies, who had initially been very stoic, seemed completely taken aback as my parents accused me of

hurting them, of destroying the house, of costing them millions in medical and repair fees.

"Sir…" The Orderly began, clearly unsure of how to handle the situation. "A kid couldn't have done this to you."

My father sneered at him through his bandages, which wrapped around his face so thoroughly he looked like a mummy.

"He did, he did!"

"You hallucinated it." The man said firmly. I found myself reminded of how the people at the hospital had told me the same thing and felt a small twinge of satisfaction.

"Both of us?" Mom squealed, rather like a piglet.

"It is more common than you may think." The Orderly said. "Especially because you have spent so much time together…"

"I'll be filing a lawsuit against your hospital." My Father sneered. "My Father is a billionaire and he-"

"Will not be paying for such a thing."

My father flinched as Grandpa Dick came into the room, smoking a cigar. Both of my grandmothers were clinging onto his arms, simpering. The Orderly looked at him.

"You are the Grandfather?" He asked.

"I am." Grandpa Dick said. "Please, take them away. They can see their son again once they are better."

"No- No!" Dad wailed, as the Orderly obediently wheeled him and his wife out of the room. "No- don't leave our son alone with him!" He struggled vainly, fighting against his binds as they were both wheeled away.

Grandpa Dick grinned wildly as he chomped on his cigar. Neither he or my Grandmas said anything to me until the Orderlies had left the room. The house was dead silent as the orderlies loaded up my parents and carried them away.

“I covered for you, you know.” Grandpa Dick said. “I know what you did.”

I said nothing to him.

“You’ve developed some kind of strange power, haven’t you?” He asked. “And you lashed out with it. Hell. It happens. It’s more believable than becoming a superhero. Usually when a kid with powers goes out in the world he gets shot by the first thug he tries to stop. I’m glad you had more sense than that.”

I shook her my head.

“Sense?” I said. “I never even thought about it. I did it because I had to.”

“Of course you did.” He said. “You want something, and someone else says no. Well, you can’t have it both ways, can you? Either you get what you want or nothing at all.”

He took a seat in the armchair across from me and surveyed me quietly. My Grandmas got on their knees and clutched at his legs, staring up at him adoringly. They seemed completely disengaged with the conversation. All they cared about was making sure my Grandfather was happy and content.

“You’re a winner, kid.” Grandpa Dick said. “You’re not like my useless son or his whore wife- you fight for what you want. My Son has spent his entire life begging me for favors- he wanted my money, but he didn’t want to work for it. You’re different. I always knew you were different.”

He folded his hands in front of him and looked at me. I looked back.

“What do you want from me?” I asked. “What do you want really?”

“You’re an exceptional boy.” He said. “And exceptional boys need to be around exceptional people. Come to my Island… I will teach you what it takes to be a man.”

“I will not.” I said firmly. “My place is here.”

Dick grinned.

“Standing up to me, are you?” he asked. “A virtue, to be sure… but you’re only saying that because you don’t understand what I’m offering. I understand. At the very least know that, if you come to my Island… you will never have to see my son or his whore again.”

He stood up.

“I will arrange for the bills to be taken care of.” He said. “I will ensure that you are well taken care of, and I will visit you every week as I have done. I care about you very much, and want nothing but the best for you.”

He held out his hand to me, and I stared at him. I didn’t like the idea of touching him- it felt wrong, somehow- but I reached forward and gripped his hand anyway.

“You’re already more of a man than you father ever will be.” He told me. In spite of myself I felt a small surge of pride.

He and my Grandmothers left me there without saying goodbye. I stood there in silence. The idea of going to my grandfather to get him to pay for everything had not even crossed my mind. I knew that he was good as his word- why would he lie? But I still didn’t like it. He was doing this because he wanted something from me.

“You’re very astute.” The Dream Girl said quietly. “He wants to use you for his own ends.”

I was angry with myself.

“I should have told him to fuck off.”

“There’s no reason to do that.” She told me sharply. “You don’t owe him anything. When the time comes- tell him no.”

She stepped away from me and into the kitchen.

“Do you want anything to eat?”

I couldn’t remember the last time someone else had cooked for me. (Whenever my parents took me to a restaurant they would always force me to go to the back and prepare my own food) I felt guilty as The Dream Girl stood in the kitchen and cooked, humming to herself, but she got angry after I asked to help her. In the end I got

out my school things and finished the next several weeks worth of reading.

"You're working very hard." She told me, as she set down my plate- shrimp and pasta. It was delicious- but I noticed very quickly that it was the exact same thing I would have made. It was very easy to forget, sometimes, that the Dream Girl was a creation of my own imagination.

There were no surprises with her- we knew each other intimately. I suppose because she was me.

"You're not hurting my feelings thinking these things." She said. "All of that is true."

"You aren't the same as a real person." I said. "Someone else- anyone else- would have been able to make something different."

She nodded. Her golden hair seemed to shine and glow. She was beautiful- but she wasn't truly real. She was simply an ideal- the kind of person I wished I had in my life. Whenever I looked into her face, I saw a strange emptiness there. As if her features weren't clearly defined.

"Perhaps that's what you need next." She said gently. "Someone you can trust… and be around."

"There's no one like that."

"There must be someone." She insisted.

I stared down at my plate, thinking deeply.

"I don't need anyone." I said. "My life… it's better now. I'm enjoying school and I have a bright future. What else would I want?"

She leaned forward.

"Love." She said simply.

I felt a longing to touch her. I reached forward, and my hand passed through her. She smiled at me- and then she was gone.

I ate my meal alone. She was right. I couldn't dwell on my dreams. I had to live. There was something more out there for me than simply

enjoying myself- and I just had to find it.

I did not see the Dream Girl again until I went to bed that night. She was sitting with her feet in the lake, staring out over the water. She did not turn around as I sat down beside her.

"You're still thinking about me." The Dream Girl said quietly. "You can't let me go."

"I haven't found anyone better." I admitted.

She giggled.

"I'm your ideal." She said. "Or… what you think of as your ideal, anyway. An actual person would be nothing like me."

'I still care about you."

"You shouldn't." She said. The wind picked up her blonde hair and it billowed around her.

"You mean a lot to me."

"Yes… too much."

She looked troubled.

"You have been using me as a crutch. Instead of finding other people-"

"There's no one else." I insisted. "No one."

She looked at me rather intently.

"There is someone." She insisted. "Someone real."

"I don't think there is."

She leaned closer to me, but I spoke before she could retort.

"If there was anyone out there- I would have found her before I found happiness." I said. "She would have been there for me. There was no one like that- besides you."

She pursed her lips.

"You are condemning a woman who had nothing to do with that." She said slowly. "Do you truly believe that all women are like your

Mother, or Ms. Krabble? Think! All you need to do is find someone like you!”

Someone like me… I had never met anyone like that in my life. My first thought was that no one liked that existed. But then I remembered:

That I existed. No one I was around had noticed or cared about what had happened to me. I had to fix the problem myself. All I had to do now was-

“There’s someone out there.” I said quietly. “A girl who’s suffering. Someone who needs me. Someone who believes- just as I did- that no one is coming to save her.”

I clenched my hand into a fist and stared at it.

“I have… to save her.” I said. “Because I have the power to do it.”

The Dream Girl nodded quietly. She began to fade away again as I got to my feet. I stared out over the lake, my expression set.

Now that I could protect myself- I needed to do my part to protect others.

I bent my knee and then leapt- I flew over the ocean, which seemed to go on forever as I kept moving forward- forward, forward- to my destination.

Wherever that was.

When I woke up the next morning I realized that I had learned how to fly. I tested it out by lifting myself off the bed and levitating for a couple of seconds. It was becoming easier and easier to bring my dream experiences into the real world.

I made breakfast for myself and then got on the bus to go to school. To my surprise, Phil Krabble came up to me, smirking.

“Dad says my sister can’t punish me.” He sneered. “It’s business as usual.”

By the end of the fight, I had smashed his head through the window, tearing apart his face. The bus driver was screaming at me

as I sat in silence, wondering what would happen next.

I was sent straight to the principal's office when I got to school. Theodore Mann had been replaced by a woman with gray hair and a stern expression.

"We have a zero-tolerance policy at this school."

"I have zero tolerance for the zero-tolerance policy." I said immediately.

She leaned forward, her eyes narrowed.

"I could call your parents." She said.

I laughed.

In the end there was nothing she could do- Mrs. Goodman came in and insisted that Phil had been in the wrong. Normally all the principal would have to do to fuck me over would be to claim she was playing favorites- but considering Phil was Mrs. Goodman's Brother she had no choice but to fold.

"Thank you…" I said quietly to Mrs. Goodman as she led me back to the classroom.

"You're welcome." She said. "But please don't take the wrong lesson from this. Fighting is never the answer, do you understand me? I don't want you fighting with Phil again."

"Even if he hits me?"

"Even then."

"I will not do that." I said. She recoiled slightly at the sharpness in my voice. "You can't protect me. So I have to protect myself."

She looked genuinely put out: I could tell that I had rattled her.

"I'll make it right!" She told me, eyes wide. "Please- you have to believe me!"

She was being earnest- in the sense that she truly would try her best to make it happen. But we both knew it would never happen.

“When he comes after me again I’ll break him in two.” I told her firmly. And that was the end of that.

Phil Krabble was crying in his seat when I entered the room. He seemed to be faking it- when everyone else in the room turned around to look at me he suddenly looked very excited.

“How long is he going to be detention?” He asked gleefully.

“That is none of your business.” Mrs. Goodman snapped. She was far more upset with Phil than she was with me.

Phil looked at me, and when I didn’t react or move a muscle he grinned.

“He needs to be expelled.” He said loudly. “After what he did to me today it’s the least he can do-“

“You’re very brave when we’re at school.” I said. “Why don’t we settle this out in the parking lot?”

A look of fear bolted through him- but Mrs. Goodman clutched my shoulder.

“We have all had enough of that.” She said sharply. “Both of you! You must stop this at once! I forbid the two of you to fight! I will be speaking to your parents about this-“ Phil began to smirk. “Yes, Phil, I WILL make Father see things my way!”

I sat down at my desk. The girl next to me smiled and flipped her hair. I ignored her.

She wasn’t the one.

I sat quietly and took notes as Phil Krabble sobbed and cried about how unfairly he was being treated- his pen untouched. By the end of the session I had five whole pages of deeply detailed notes while Phil sat there throwing his tantrum, doing nothing of value. I realized then that he would likely be like this for the rest of his life.

I went home alone, spent some time reading, and then returned to bed. The Dream Girl was waiting for me, and we spent some time on the lake again, discussing the day’s events.

The days were by quickly, and in much the same way. Once a week on Sunday my Grandfather and my other grandparents would come to my house. They would ask me how things were going, and would describe their adventures. Diving in Hawaii, snorting cocaine off of hookers in Thailand, and dancing all night long in Jamaica.

"The world is our resort, boy." Grandpa Dick said. "We sleep only during our flights around it. I have my jet set us down whenever we're well rested and ready to party."

"Sounds like an empty life." I commented, without looking up from my book. I could feel an intense, hot gaze on me and I looked up to see Grandpa staring at me.

"Having experiences is what makes life worth living." He said. "It's way better than reading books."

"I think Bradbury had you mind when he wrote Fahrenheit 451." I said dismissively.

Grandpa Dick bristled as I returned to my book. He did not speak to me when he left- instead, it was Grandpa Nick who stayed behind.

"You shouldn't upset him you know." He said. He was a small, ratlike man who always looked eager to please. "Without him- neither of us would have any money!"

This what I always hated about Grandpa Nick, and the entire rest of my family- they allowed Grandpa Dick to say and do whatever he wanted because the alternative was getting a job and living among normal people. Grandpa Nick had given up his own wife to secure his place financially- something that had disgusted me the moment I had first learned about it. These people would suffer any indignity, any inconvenience, any amount of suffering as long as they could wake up and not go to work in the morning.

I resented that- that was not the way I wanted to live my life. Even the way I was living now- every bill and necessity paid for- was intolerable. My Grandfather was trying to control me the same way he controlled everyone else in my family. And I would not have it.

“He’s a monster.” The Dream Girl told me quietly, as I studied in my dream. “He knows and cares about nothing other than money.”

“He loves me…” I murmured.

“In his own way. But it’s a cruel, twisted kind of love. He sees you as another asset to use. You are his legacy- you are something he cannot afford to lose. No amount of money can replace you.”

I felt the golden glow of my dream surround me. I felt powerless- my life had gotten better after my parents had left, but that had only allowed my Grandfather to move in. His shadow had hung over me since before I was born, and now he was expecting to use me for his own ends.

Whatever those may be.

“Your dreams are now clashing with others.” The Dream Girl said. “Before you were dealing with the apathy and ignorance of other people. Now you are clashing with people with goals and dreams of their own. His dream for you overshadows your own, and has controlled your destiny.”

“Until now.”

“It will not be so easy to break from his control.” She warned me. “He knows you are not so easily controlled- which is why he has given you so much freedom. He is trying to make you feel as if it is in your best interest to do as he wants. He wants your dream to be nothing more than to make him happy.”

“That isn’t going to happen.”

“He doesn’t feel that way. You have already allowed him to control you.”

I flared my nostrils.

“I had no choice.”

“Do you think that other people in your position don’t feel the same way? Do you feel as if people freely choose to be slaves? You’re allowing yourself to be used because it is easier for you.”

I shook my head.

“It was my decision.”

“That’s what he wants you to think!”

I looked up at her sharply. She seemed quite a bit more intense and forceful with that pronouncement.

“You acknowledge your grandfather is an evil man- but you still allow him in your life. You still allow him to care for you.”

“For now-“

“You are giving him exactly what he expects!” She snapped at me. “You are already conceding!”

I grit my teeth. She was right- I had known she was right from the start.

“What else can I do?” I asked. “I’m working on getting out- but I’m not ready yet. No one will give me a job. I’m still underage, and have no where else to go. I will suffer under him now so that I will live a happy life later.”

“Is that really what you want?”

“Of course not.” I said. “But I have to do it.”

She looked at me rather intently.

“Do you?”

I seized up and then stared down at the ground.

“There’s nothing I can do.” I said bitterly. “There’s nothing-“

“You dare not even dream?”

I looked back up at her, and she was still staring intently at me.

I woke up immediately after that. I was sweating rather intently. I felt a little rattled. I went downstairs and made myself my orange juice and then stood in the hallway, staring around me in silence.

Was she right? Was I not doing enough to move on? I stood there and stared at the rug on the floor. I liked that rug. The idea of never seeing it again bothered me.

I looked up at the wall and at the photographs on the wall. My parents stared down at me from every angle. I was not in any of them, but my Grandfather was. It pissed me off so badly that I leaned forward and began to remove them from the walls.

It took me about half an hour to throw them all away and I stood, transfixed, at the empty hall. It felt reassuring to me that my parents, in this small way, had no bearing on my life. It had happened after a lifetime of pain and suffering. And now, today, I was happier than ever.

I knew then that the Dream Girl was wrong- I would stand up to my Grandfather when it was necessary, and not before. I would prepare myself for the inevitability of him cutting off support, but until that happened I would continue as I had been.

But I hated myself for it.

When I returned to school I was a little bit more angry than I had been in the past. The first time Phil Krabble tried to jump me I grabbed hold of him and somehow shoved him into a locker that was much too small for him. I apologized to Mrs. Goodman while the school janitors tried to pry him out with an iron bar.

"You need to stop doing this." Mrs. Goodman said, her voice faint. She was struggling very deeply with herself: She knew that Phil was the one picking fights- but it was also her responsibility to hold me accountable as well.

"I will." I told her. "When he gives me reason not to."

She pursed her lips.

"I'm sorry… but I can't keep allowing you to get away with this." She said. "I'll be giving you both a detention."

I thanked her, and did my detention without complaint while Phil Krabble whined and sobbed next to me. It was perfectly reasonable, I thought, to be punished for something I did do. By the end of it Mrs. Goodman apologized to me, and reprimanded Phil for his behavior during it.

Phil was crying even harder now. I felt my temper rising.

“Look.” I said. “You need to grow up.”

He gave me a startled glance and fell silent. He looked angry.

“Please.” Goodman said sharply. “The two of you- you need to stop fighting!”

I had spent all detention studying, so I did not study as I usually did when I got home. Instead I went out for a walk with The Dream Girl.

“Spring is coming.” She said quietly, as we walked through the park. “It’ll be beautiful soon.”

“It’s beautiful already.” I said, while looking at her.

She giggled.

“Practicing on me won’t do you any good.” She said. “I’m just a dream, remember? I’ll love you no matter what you say or do.”

“I’d like a real girl to feel the same way.”

“Real love isn’t like that.” The Dream Girl said. “Real couples fight, you know? It’s normal.”

I fell silent as we walked in the snow. I was thinking deeply about what she was saying to me.

“But I don’t want to fight someone I love.”

“No one does. But you’re talking about a man and a woman who may feel differently about things.”

“Maybe then they shouldn’t get married.”

The Dream Girl looked at me as I thought about my parents. In spite of everything they had stayed married. I wondered if they genuinely loved each other, or if they were only together out of convenience. Somehow, when I was being abused the dynamics of my parent’s relationship had never crossed my mind. There was so much I did not know about them.

“Maybe I need to be around different people.” I said. “So I have a better idea of what I want.”

In the end we ended up visiting a library. The Dream Girl walked around like a ghost, picking up books off the shelf and flipping through them. I spent my time walking through the aisles, watching other people.

“Can I help you?”

A beak nosed librarian stared down at me with deep dislike.

“I’m just looking.” I told her. The girl I had been watching from a couple of aisles back looked up at us curiously, her long brown hair falling across her face.

“Looking for something to steal.” She said. She reached forward to grab my arm, and I pulled away from her.

“Do you have a library card?” She asked, advancing on me.

“No.” I said.

She gripped my arm tightly. “Then why are you here?” She sneered.

“I-“

The girl with brown hair shut the book with a snap and strode over to us.

“There you are.” She said pompously, as she grabbed my arm. “I’ve been looking everywhere for you!”

She looked up at the librarian and gave her a look.

“Did he do something that he shouldn’t have?” She asked.

The Librarian looked between us, her eyes narrowed.

“I would certainly ask you to have a better choice in boys.” She sniffed. But she allowed us to go.

The girl clutched my arm and dragged me away, out of the aisle and back onto the street.

“Sorry about that.” She said. “The old bat goes after anyone she thinks is suspicious….”

“I don’t look suspicious.” I said.

She stopped and turned to face me.

“You’re dressed like a hooligan and look as if you could rip a book in half with your bare hands.”

“I could, but I wasn’t going to.” I said. The girl nodded, staring rather intently at me with big brown eyes. “Thank you anyway.”

“You’re very welcome.” She said. “I’m Kathleen. And… you are?”

I raised my hand to my hair and brushed it back, grinning. “I don’t give my name to strangers.”

She pouted at me, her eyes sallow. “Come on!” She said. “We have just become acquainted! It’s only right you-“

“You’re English.” I said. “From… Manchester, I think.”

“Oooooh, very good.” She said. She bounced a little on her heels. It was adorable. “You could tell by my accent, I presume?”

“You have a Manchester United pin on your bag.”

She glanced down at it, and then flushed, looking back up at me.

“I see that you’re familiar with the methods of Sherlock Holmes.” She said. “What else can you deduce from my appearance?”

“I think you’re very lonely- and need a friend. Considering you came over to help me when I didn’t truly need it.”

She flushed again.

“I… I just wanted to help, is all…” She said quietly. “She’s really very rude. She thinks that children interested in a library are only looking to burn it down.”

She gave a pointed look at me. “Perhaps if you had a card she wouldn’t have judged you so harshly.”

“Perhaps.” I said quietly. “Let’s go for a walk.”

She looked surprised for a bit, and then smiled at me as I led her back to the park- the same park that I had just walked through with

the Dream Girl. I could feel my heart beating rapidly in my chest: This was different than it had been with the Dream Girl.

“I probably shouldn’t be out here with you.” She confessed. “Especially since you won’t give me your name.” The Dream Girl had never said anything like that to me: but I took it all in stride.

“Well we don’t have to see eye to eye on everything.” I told.

“That’s true.” She said, humming thoughtfully. “You’re quite a bit more thoughtful than I would expect, by looking at you. And with you being an American.”

“You’re quite a bit less snobby than I would expect, being a Brit.”

“Oh, you think so?” She asked. “Do you think all Brits are snobby, then?”

“I think you can find snobby people everywhere.” I answered truthfully. She looked at me, thought about it for a moment, and pursed her lips.

“I’m not sure being snobby is a bad thing really.” She said. “Doesn’t it just mean you have standards in who you spend your time with?”

“You really are a brit.”

She pouted at me, and then bent over to scoop up a ball of snow in her hand. She threw it at me, and we both laughed.

“These things…” She said. “Being snobby, being American… they don’t really mean anything, do they? It’s just a matter of perspective.”

“Maybe that’s just your perspective.” I said. “They do mean something- but it’s not obvious what that something is.”

“Hmmm…” She said, tiling her head to the side. “A philosopher, are you?”

“No. I’m just a man.”

She shook her head. “You’re a boy.” She said. “But you’re more mature than most…” She looked at me rather intently. “Too mature, I

would say. You're well read, you speak well… but you look as if you've gone through hell. Who are you?"

"I'm me." I said. We looked at each other rather. The girl glanced down at the snow, and then back to me. We looked at each other. I could tell instantly that we both wanted the same thing, but it simply wasn't going to work.

"I'm sorry." She said. "I feel as if… there's some kind of rift between us. I like you- but we're not ready yet. We both have a lot of growing up to do- both of us. I'm going home to Manchester soon. I don't think I'll be able to see you again. I want- I want us to part on good terms."

I looked at her rather intently. She stared at me right back.

"You're a very good woman." I said. "But let's not make reservations about this- if you leave now you'll never see me again. Are you alright with that?"

She bit her lip and looked away.

"I am not." She said slowly. "If I was an adult, and could make my own decisions… I would love to see you again. If we had met later in life I think we could have loved each other. But right now… neither of us are ready."

She looked back to me. She was crying.

"Thank you for not telling me your name." She said. "If you had- I would have thought about you for the rest of my life. I don't want that- for myself, or for my husband."

"I don't want that either." I said quietly. "I want you to live a happy life."

She smiled at me, and then turned away.

She wasn't the one.

But she turned back and waved wildly.

"Thank you very much!" She called out. "I had fun today!"

And then she was gone.

The Dream Girl was waiting for me by the library. She had a stack of books in her arms.

“Did you have fun?” She asked.

“I did.” I answered. “But it didn’t go anywhere.”

“You can’t expect every good girl to become your wife.” The Dream Girl said. “You respect each other- that’s far more important.”

“If everyone was more like her-“

“Be thankful that people like her do exist.” The Dream girl said firmly. “You barely knew each other- but you felt a connection all the same. Someday you’ll be ready to make something of that connection. It very may even be with her.”

“I don’t think I’ll see her again.” I said quietly. “I need to move on.”

The Dream Girl nodded, and then took my arm.

“Come on.” She cajoled. “I found you some good books to read.”

I spent the rest of the day sitting around the house, reading and thinking about what I wanted to do next. My schoolwork was finished, but my mind was a complete blank. I wasn’t sure what I wanted. I kept thinking back to Kathleen, and her long brown hair.

“You look upset.” The Dream Girl said quietly.

I looked over at her, and she now looked exactly like Kathleen. Her long brown hair fell across her in waves, and she was looking at me rather expectantly.

“I think I fell in love with her a little.” I said.

“You think?” She asked, as she flicked her hair over her shoulder. It dawned on me then how I knew she was going to do that- it struck me as something Kathleen might have done. But would she have, really? In the end I barely knew her at all.

“It’s alright.” Kathleen the Dream Girl said soothingly. “You’ll meet other girls.”

“When I do- will that mean that meeting Kathleen meant nothing?”

“Of course not.” The Dream girl said quietly. “Remember this moment: When she comes, value her always.”

I took in a deep breath and tried to relax.

“Value…” I murmured. “Someone… I would do anything for…”

I fell silent as I thought about this, as I continued my reading. I read until I passed out, and then read some more in the Dream World. The Dream Girl joined, me, and we spent a good amount of time sitting in silence.

When I went to school the next morning, I took my seat as always. Phil Krabble smirked at me. I raised my hand to show him the tack he had placed on my chair and flicked it at him.

“Enough of that!” Mrs. Goodman snapped at me. Phil’s smirk deepened.

“You too, Phil!” Mrs. Goodman said. “Settle down, both of you. I have an important announcement to make.”

Phil stopped as he stared at the front of the room, slack jawed there, standing in the front of the room, was a girl with long black hair.

She was a shockingly beautiful creature- her pale skin looked as if it had never touched the sun, and her face was face was elegant and flawless. She wore a long black dress that trailed the floor. She looked dour and miserable- but it somehow made her even cuter.

“As you can you see- we have a new student.” Mrs. Goodman said, smiling. “Now- will you tell the class your name?”

“I am Nightmare.” The girl rasped. I was the only one who laughed. She looked pointedly at me.

“You think my name is funny, do you?’ She challenged. I felt my heart skip a beat.

“No, I think it’s cute.” I said. I held my hand out to her. “You can sit next to me.”

“No, she won’t.” Mrs. Goodman said firmly. “Now, Mara-“

“Nightmare.”

“You’re sitting over there.”

Nightmare turned her head away from me as she took a seat a couple of rows in front of me. I stood up, and then made my way over to her.

“Hey.” I said. “I’m-“

“I don’t care who you are.” She said icily. I smiled at her.

“Sit down, please.” Mrs. Goodman said, exasperated, waving me back.

“Rejected!” Phil crowd, and the entire class laughed. I smiled at Nightmare and shook my head as I turned around and took my seat.

The instant class ended I went to speak to her again. This time she whirled on me, drawing a knife and pointing it at me. I did not flinch away from her as I leaned in closer.

“Take one step further and you’ll get it.” She challenged roughly, as she pressed the blade against my chest.

I grabbed her wrist and twisted, breaking the knife from her grip and catching it in mid-air with my other hand.

“Get what, exactly?” I asked. The rest of the class was filtering out of the classroom. Not a single person seemed to notice or care that she had just tried to stab me. I was right- things had gone back to the way they were before. The difference was that I was now better prepared to deal with them.

She squirmed slightly, averting from my gaze as she anxiously tried yanking her arm from my grip. “What are you doing? Let go of me!”

“You said your name was Mara, right?”

“It’s Nightmare!” She said. Deep black energy began to emanate from her in waves. “Get- get away from me!”

My own golden energy clashed with hers, and she shirked back in surprise. I held her for a bit as she settled down.

“I knew it.” I said quietly. “You’re causing the Nightmare, aren’t you? You’re the reason things are this way.”

She squirmed under my grip, struggling to break my grip. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You’ve allowed your nightmares to define your life.” I said. “You push people away and refuse to see the good in them.”

She sneered at me as she pulled her arm away from me.

“There is no good in this world.” She said. “Only Nightmares!”

I reached up my hand and smacked her straight across the face. And not gently, either. She recoiled and then stared at me with a shocked look on her face. I could tell she had never been hit before in her life.

“That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.” I said. She looked up at me, glowering.

“I should kill you for that.” She rasped.

“How? Your powers are nothing compared to my own. The moment you came here to confront me, you must have known that.”

She stared intently at me, her eyes blazing. I could feel the searing, evil energy surrounding her.

“I will not ask you again.” She said. “Leave me be. Let me suffer.”

“I will not.” I said. “The way you’re living your life is wrong. I can’t allow you to keep doing this to everyone.”

“Everyone- How dare you?” She screeched. “You don’t know what it’s like, being me!”

She broke down into tears. I released her hair and stared at her rather intently as she wiped her eyes.

“No matter what I say, or what I do- people are kind to me because who I am.” She said. “I have nothing, do you understand me? Nothing!”

I looked at her, and then I said:

“I do understand.”

She stopped, staring at me rather intently.

“No you don’t.” She said. “You think I’m a selfish, spoiled brat.”

She tried to push herself away from me, but I hung onto her tightly.

“What do you want from me?” She demanded.

“Nothing.”

“You lie!”

“Why do you think that?”

“Because you’re all the same.”

“I’m different.” I said. Her black energy clashed with my gold, and it dissipated. She glanced down at her feet, biting her lip.

“You’re worse than the others.” She decided. “You… want to hurt me. To do things to me. To make me suffer, simply for your own pleasure.”

“I’m not doing this for me.” I told her. “I’m doing this for you.”

“You’re a gaslighter. You’re-“

She froze as I raised my hand again.

“You’re learning.” I said. Her eyes flashed at me.

“You’re a monster.” She said. “You’re evil, you-“

She shuddered a little bit. The little black tendrils that had been crawling up my leg were pushed away by the sheer force of my golden light. “Who are you?” She whispered. “I have never met anyone who could…”

“I’ve never met anyone like you either.” I told her. She deflated slightly. She looked somehow helpless now.

"Do you know why I call myself Nightmare?” She asked. “Because… that’s my entire life. You’re… different from me somehow. I don’t… know what to make of you.”

“It’s a mystery.” I told her.

She twisted her lip.

“No matter what I do- these people won’t change.” She said. “At their core they are cruel, evil people who only care about themselves.”

“Are you talking about them… or yourself?”

She seized up.

“I act this way because of what other people are like.” She said stiffly. “It is the nature of human beings- it was decided thus before we were born.”

“But you told me that I’m nothing like that.”

“Don’t question me- Agh!”

I pulled her hair, and she stumbled a little.

“Look.” I said. “You’re obviously insane and no one else is going to come along to keep you in line. So I’m going to have to do it.”

The girl raised her hands and tried to slap away my hand.

“Let- Let go of me!”

I released her. She took a step back, scowling at me. The instant she had some distance from me her dark, evil aura began to flare more intensely. I could feel the air become a lot more cold- and strange lights were coming in through the window.

“This will be the last time you lay a hand on me.” She said.

The lockers next to began to shuffle- and then burst open. A giant beast with a gaping maw leapt forward. It was like a thing out of nightmares- it had a strange dislocated jaw that made its rows and rows of teeth look as if they could shred me apart in a single bite.

I looked up at it, and I blew its head open with a blast of golden energy.

Nightmare stood there, watching, as the beast of her nightmares fell at my feet. She grit her teeth and bent her head. The shadows of her dark energy surrounded her, and then she was gone.

Immediately the school went back to normal. People were walking in the halls again and chatting, almost like nothing had happened. The Dream Girl stood to the side, watching me intently. She no longer quite resembled Kathleen.

“She’s dangerous.” She said quietly. “She’s suicidal and hates herself so much that she wants to take it out on other people."

“I know.” I said quietly. “But what can I do, really? I can’t force her to change.”

“I’m not sure.” The Dream Girl admitted. “But I suppose… when there’s nothing you can do.. you do what you can.”

I nodded, my mind made up.

From that day onward I spent my free time putting a stop to Nightmare’s attempts at terrorizing others. I spent my time at home training my powers past their limits. I knew that Nightmare Girl was doing the same.

Every time I went back to school there was this ominous feeling in the air. The world was ending. Disease had broken out. Zombies were attacking the school. A werewolf was attacking teachers. Everything that Nightmare could think of was waiting for me there, and I dealt with them all. Day after day after day- things continued as normal.

For someone like Nightmare, who reveled in destroying the lives of other people, it shook her entire world. What had once been an air of confidence and bravado had given way to a shaking, silent girl. She did not speak to me in the classroom, even when I spoke to her.

“I don’t… I can’t…” She murmured. I saw her glance at a picture of the Confederate Flag once, and within five minutes there were men outside the school declaring a revolution. When I put an end to them, she seemed even more despondent.

“Is there something wrong with her?” Mrs. Goodman asked me. “Did something happen between you two?”

I shook my head.

“I only ask because she keeps talking about you.” Mrs. Goodman said. “I won’t ask you to be her friend… but please respect her feelings, alright?”

“I will.” I told her. She smiled at me warmly and thanked me. I walked away troubled. I wasn’t sure whether I was being considerate of her feelings: All I was doing was putting an end to her nonsense.

Everyday she would try and throw something new and dangerous at me- dragons, pirates- and even a monstrous mermaid leapt out from the school pool and tried to drown me once. But every time I would fight them off and greet her just as cordially as I always had.

“Why?” She asked me, through tears. “Why won’t you leave me alone?”

“You’re not scaring me.” I told her. “There’s nothing you can come up with that would drive me away.”

Her hands trembled.

“Perhaps, if you knew me better…” I suggested shrugging my shoulders. Her eyes began to gleam.

“Yes… yes, that’s it.” She said. She seemed to regain a fraction of her old bravado. “I’ll come by your house and destroy you! Bwahahaha!”

She laughed uproariously, which led to several people giving her bewildered glances. She was known for being stoic and silent most of the time- the fact that she could be so cartoonish had never even crossed their minds. But it didn’t surprise me at all. I was giving her exactly what she wanted.

She came by my house in the Middle of the Night riding some demonic skeleton creature. It stood about two stories high and had teeth about the size of my whole body.

She stepped through my bedroom window rather daintily and looked around. She looked happier than I had ever seen her.

“You have to some kind of weakness.” She said to herself, as she looked around. The skeleton simply stood there and looked at me as she went through my things. I turned around to look at her as she tore through my closet.

"Everything you wear is so BORING.” She complained wildly.

“I’m a guy.”

“There has to be something here-“

She stepped around the bed and in one movement pushed it up and looked under it.

“No!” She said. “No porn or anything!”

She set the mattress around and glanced around the room. Her eyes roamed over the barren walls and floor.

“You live a spartan existence.” She said.

The comment threw me for a loop. In all of the time I had been living here on my own I had never even thought about decorating my room. Leave it to a girl to point that out to me.

“I’m living on my own now and haven’t had time to personalize it.” I said.

“Hmmm.” She said. “Maybe…”

She drew her knife and began hacking at the curtain. I stood and watched her as she worked. When she pulled away, the fabric was tattered.

“A curtain fit for a warrior.” She proclaimed proudly, as she stepped back and admired her handiwork.

“I didn’t know warriors wanted the sun on their face.”

She made a face at me.

“It’s to wake you up in the morning.” She said. “After a long night of pain and suffering from your nightmares.”

“Whatever” I said. “Hang on.”

I took the knife from her, and then took her long black skirt in her hand. I hacked it off with the knife.

“Wha- what are you doing?” She asked, outraged, trying to pull away from me. I held her still as I continued my work.

“I want to see your legs.” I said. When I pulled away the skirt was short enough to show off her upper thigh, which were covered in pure black socks. She grimaced at me.

“You’re a creep and a weirdo.” She said. She did a little twirl, and glanced at herself in the mirror. “I’ll never wear anything this scandalous ever again.”

She pulled the skirt up and examined her thigh, and then glanced at me. She lowered her skirt and straightened herself. “You know, I rather hate your guts.”

“Do you?” I asked. “How badly do you hate me?”

She leaned in closer to me and gripped my hair with her hands. “I’d rip your head off I could.”

“It would be worse if you kissed me.”

“I’m not falling for that.” She said. And then I leaned forward and kissed her anyway.

I knew instantly that it was her first kiss too- Her leg instinctively shot up, and it wrapped around me as I held her close.

“You’re a terrible kisser.” She told me. I could feel her heart racing in her chest, she was so close.

“You’re a bad liar.” I said, and I kissed her again. When I tried to pull away from her, she insisted that she wasn’t finished and forced me to kiss her a third time.

“Well.” She said, as she held my head. “Uh- what do you we do now?”

“Let’s make dinner.”

She sat the kitchen table and watched as I cooked. She watched me intently as I deftly prepared some seafood and cheese.

“I’m vegan…” She said and only touched the vegetables. “They’re good, though… I can’t cook at all.”

“You should learn. I can teach you.”

“I’m not interested.”

“Sure you are.”

“No- I’m not.”

“You’ve never tried.”

She looked at me and then nodded, her lips pursed.

“My parents would never let me cook…” She said quietly. “They have everything prepared for me… they didn’t want me to lift a finger.” She paused, her breath hitching in her throat. “I hate it.”

I looked at her, listening intently.

“I know your life is quite different.” Nightmare said, a bit bitterly. “But for me I live a blessed existence. The finest food, the biggest house in the nicest neighborhood. I have met celebrities and academics… and every single one of them thought they could use me for their own gain.”

“You have suffered.” I told her quietly. She nodded, her face set.

“I am loved only because of what I can provide for others.” She said quietly. “My parents do not see me as a person, but an asset- something they can use to increase their own power and influence. What I wanted has never mattered to them.”

She clutched her arm, and bit her lip. She seemed to be deep in thought.

“What did they do to you?” I asked her. She glanced away from me, and looked forlornly into the darkness.

“Nothing.” She replied quietly. “Nothing at all.”

She looked downright disturbed. She looked more distant and haunted than I had ever seen her. I was certain that this was why she had become who she was.

“However you were treated as a child- that gives you no right to terrorize others.”

“I cannot help it.” Nightmare said quietly. “Did you think that I meant to hurt you, or anyone else? No… these thoughts come from me, and take form, and cause others to suffer. I can’t… I can’t stop myself. The only time I feel like a normal girl is when I- when I’m with you.”

She trembled slightly. I watched her from across the table, considering.

“I was alone too.” I said quietly. “But that’s no longer true- for either of us.”

I took her hand. She flinched. I held on more tightly, and she relaxed.

“You’re so warm…” She said quietly. “You… you complete me. I feel it- the void in my heart- it’s closing now and I don’t know- I don’t know what will happen when it does. I won’t be me anymore.”

“You will be.” I said. “You’ll be a better version of you. We are not built by our experiences alone- but by our relationships with others. I will change, and you will change, and we will change together. Until-“

“Until death do us part.” She said quietly. She seemed a little bit more comfortable saying that bit out loud. “Yes… I will continue to grow and change until I die…”

She looked almost pained as she raised her other hand and took mine, clutching it. It looked very difficult for her.

“What’s wrong?” I asked her.

“Nothing.”

“You’re scared. Anxious. Why?”

She trembled. I had the very distinct impression that no one had ever asked her how she was feeling before, or knew her well enough to see when she was troubled.

“It’s hard.” She said. “It’s so much easier to hate the world and everyone in it.”

“Easier- but nothing more.” I said.

“Nothing more.” She repeated. A tad bit of a musical note passed her lips. “Nevermore…”

“You are my Lenore.”

She gave a surprised start and turned a bright red.

“You- you’ve read Poe?” She said breathlessly. I nodded. Her eyes shone with a brightness I had never seen before. We stared at each other, enraptured. And then a voice came from the shadows:

“This is how you treat a woman?”

Nightmare screamed and stood up. My Grandfather was standing in the doorway, a glass of wine in his hand.

Nightmare hurriedly made her way to my side of the table, getting some distance away from him. Grandpa Dick was looking at me with a rather tight expression.

“You get a girl to come home with you and you… do nothing to her.” He said. “You’re never going to make it, kid.”

He took a long drink of out of his glass, and then threw it. I pulled Nightmare out of the way as it slammed into the wall behind us and exploded into pieces.

“You are going to clean that up.” I said coldly.

“What do you think I am, a woman?” He sneered. “You should thank me. I’m going to teach you a valuable life lesson.”

He sat down in Nightmare’s chair and looked at us.

“Women aren’t capable of love.” He said. “They only respect money, and power… You can do anything you want to them if you have that.”

He took out a cigar and began puffing on it. Nightmare stared at him: She was clutching my arm rather intently.

"Who- is –"

"This is my Grandpa Dick." I said. "He's an asshole." If Grandpa Dick was offended by this he certainly didn't show it.

"A pleasure to meet you, Young Lady." He said. "I must say… you're rather mature for your age."

"You're a pedophile." She said immediately, without hesitation. The fact that she had been able to peg him so quickly boggled my mind.

Grandpa Dick laughed.

"I don't deny it." He said. "But little girls like you want someone like me."

"No… I don't." Nightmare said quietly. I could feel the black energy welling up around her. I instinctively placed my hand over hers. It suddenly dawned on me why, exactly, she had been so averse to love until now. She had been surrounded by people like my Grandfather her entire life.

Dick looked surprised for a split second, and then his gaze fell onto me.

"I see." He said slowly. "You think you already have my money."

He stood up, the cigar smoking in his house.

"I own the house. I pay his bills. He's only who he is today because of me. I'm more of a man than he'll ever be."

Nightmare looked at him sharply.

"Nevermore." She said.

"Pardon me?"

"Nevermore- Quoth the Raven."

"I have no idea what you're talking about."

Nightmare turned to look at me, and leaned her weight into me.

"Please…" She said to me. "Take me home." She tightly gripped my arm, her gaze fixated away from Grandpa Dick.

“You’re not going anywhere.” Grandpa Dick said. He advanced on us, the cigar still burning in his mouth. “You’re both coming with me.”

I ignored him. ‘Come on, let’s go.” I told Nightmare.

She nodded faintly, clutching my arm. I could feel smoke billowing past us as I led my woman across the hall and to the door.

“Where are you going?” Grandpa Dick asked. Nightmare coughed, raising a hand to her face. I turned to ask her if she was alright, and then I realized.

The entire room was on fire.

The entire place had become enveloped in flame. My mind went blank for a brief moment- I could not understand how this could have happened so quickly. But when I registered the pure dark energy emanating from the girl next to me, I realized what.

“Nightmare!” I snapped, whirling her around to face me. “You have to calm down!”

Black energy was spilling off of her in waves. The shock of being harassed by a man, just when she had let her guard down was too much to bear. Her traumas were seeping out through her Nightmares into the real world. The only reason it wasn’t much worse was because I was still holding her.

“Nightmare!” I said. “Listen to me! No matter what happens- know this! I’ll be there for you!”

She shook her head wildly.

“No- you can’t!” She wailed. “It’ll never work- it can never work!”

She tried to pull away from me, but I held onto her. The fire began more intense, as my Grandfather stepped forward.

“So she too has powers.” He said quietly. He had seemed to grow several feet, and towered over us. He looked younger, more powerful, and dangerous. “But she hasn’t the control over them that you do.”

I scowled at him.

“Back off or I’ll hurt you!”

He grinned. I could see the Nightmare energy seeping into him. Nightmare’s fears of what he may to do her were going to become a reality.

But if I let her go- things would become so much worse. I had to fight him off- but I would have to let her go to do it.

I had no choice.

“I’ll be right back!” I told her, sharply.

I released her- and then all hell broke loose.

I had known that my powers were the only thing suppressing hers- but without me holding her they exploded outward. The flames enveloped all of us and it was all I could to keep myself standing. I could feel her fear, her shock and pain enveloping me so thoroughly that I was almost overwhelmed by it.

“Nightmare!” I screamed, as I took my first step forward. “I love you! Never forget that!”

I could see my grandfather growing even more larger and monstrous in the flames. He reached forward, and with one hand reached past me and grabbed Nightmare from right behind me.

I whirled around to try and stop him- but it was too late. He held her in a single hand as he stood tall, bat like wings spreading on either side of him.

“Come to my Island!” He shouted, as his wings spread wide. “And claim your Prize!”

He leapt up, beat his wings once, and then shot off like a Rocket. Nightmare let out a terrified wail as she was yanked through the air.

Without hesitation I leapt up after them, flying through the ceiling. I shot out of the flames and whirled around, trying to get my bearings. I could see them tearing off into the distance, and I immediately took off after them.

I had never flown at such high speed. My hair whipped around my face and the cold air was almost overwhelming. But I could not afford to waste my energy on trifles. I needed speed, and I needed to prepare myself for what was to come.

Nightmare had lived a sheltered, lonely life- she had been completely broken by being so isolated. Being exposed to such evil as my Grandfather would be too much for her- she would lose all faith in humanity. She had already longed for the deaths of all those around her. How much worse would things become once she was exposed to true evil?

I had never been to my Grandfather's Island- but it turned out to be quite a bit nightmarish when I arrived.

A giant dragon statue overlooked the island with its gaping mouth wide open. My Grandfather shot inside, and the statue's mouth slowly closed. I hit the statue at high speed and shattered it into pieces. I made to go in after them- but saw the inside of the statue was pure stone.

We were operating on Dream Logic now, rather than real world logic. I never realized how scary such a thing could be, when I was not in control of the dream. I turned around in mid-air, searching the facility for where they had gone- when a number of men in uniforms stepped out to meet me.

"Dream Warrior!" They called. "Stand down now!"

I stared down at them with nothing but contempt. They did not wait for a reply as they readied their weapons. I landed on the ground to confront them, my fists clenched.

The men descended on me. They drew their swords and struck out at me. I leapt into the air, spinning, and caught each one of them in the face with a mighty kick. They all went flying.

"Nightmare." I said aloud. "My Lenore."

I paused, feeling rather hesitant: In the poem Lenore was dead. It had been a cute thing in the heat of the moment, but perhaps now wasn't the time or place for it. But I still pushed on.

“Nevermore will you be Nightmare.” I said. “Please- know this! I care about you!”

The ground shook, and split open. The security guards struggled to stand as demons crawled out of the earth, snarling. I dove past them, knocking off heads as I went, shouting Nightmare’s name and telling her that I loved her.

I found myself deep in Hell- surrounded by all sorts of demons. Spiders crawled in and outs of fiery cracks in the earth, carrying their human victims to be devoured. The demons below were more serpentine- rising out of the lava and reaching skyward, swaying back and forth like tendrils as they waited to grab hold of me.

But there was no girl, and no Grandpa Dick.

“Where is she?” I demanded, screaming into the pitch black ether below.

A laughing demon came to me, out of the darkness, and she spoke thus:

“Come to me, child. And you will forget her.”

She was gorgeous creature with long flowing red hair and flawless skin. She smiled at me, biting her lip as she beckoned me closer, running her hands across her chest, waist, and hips.

I ignored her.

“Where is she?” I demanded again of the ether.

“H-hey…” The demon said, as she thrust her chest in my face. “My boobs are right here?”

I shoved her away and she slammed into the stone wall. She let out an annoyed hiss, and then crawled off on all fours into a crack in Earth like an insect.

“Nightmare!” I called out, into the darkness. “Even in your darkest hour, there is light! Believe in me!”

The light surrounding me became bright and intense. The demons below screamed as the light enveloped them, and they shirked back

into the lava. The lava itself seemed to recede- revealing a stone staircase descending deeper into the earth.

I shot downwards and flew down the staircase- the golden light around me illuminating the way. The ground gave way to nothingness, and I found myself surrounded by stars.

Dream logic. I told myself sharply, as I turned around, getting a bearing for my new surroundings. What could be more dark and dangerous than the dark recesses of space?

I imagined the golden light enveloping me completely, and I became the sun. My golden rays shining across the universe.

"Nightmare!" I called. "Nightmare! Wake up!"

"Even stars die." My Grandfather rumbled.

He was there, on a distant planet. He was sitting on a throne that sat on a mountain of cocaine. Nightmare was kneeling at his side, a giant chain collared to her neck.

"Oh!" She cried, tugging on the chain. "I-"

He yanked on the chain and she fell back with a cry. "Shut up, bitch!"

I felt my temper flaring.

"Stay away from her!"

Over the next six billion years we did battle. I, the Sun God, cultivated a species on the third planet from the sun to become space faring warriors and do battle with his slaves. He, the god of a false planet on the edge of the solar system commanded legions of forces to battle against me. Angels born on the sixth and largest planet commanded legions of creatures from the five planets on the outer rim of the solar system- while the planets closer to my light were settled by demons that sought to destroy me.

It was a battle on two fronts- my people had to protect me, while advancing endlessly towards the target. Throughout all of it I could hear Nightmare's cries and sobs.

“Don’t come any closer!” She said. “I… hate you!”

It only made me want her back more. It was more her own desire to suffer that kept me at bay for so long- my Grandfather himself balked at me now.

“Who are you?” He cried, as I climbed the stairs to his decaying throne, my golden sword forged by the heat of the sun in hand. The mountain of cocaine had long been snorted away, and his planet looked barren and empty.

I raised the sword and brought it down on the chain. Nightmare whimpered. Instead of standing up and running, she lay there, curled up into a ball.

“She’s mine, I tell you!” Grandpa Dick snapped. “Mine!”

When he tried to bend down and grab her she recoiled. She dragged herself across the planet to get away from him.

“No- stay away from me! Both of you!”

I looked at her, and set down my sword. I looked at her.

“As you wish.” I said quietly, my hand still placed firmly over the hilt of the sword.

“Get over here, you!” Grandpa Dick sneered. He reached forward to grab her- and I raised my sword and cut off his arm.

He let out a scream as he fell to his knees. Nightmare looked up at me, her eyes wide.

“Come on.” I cajoled, as I held out my hand to her. I did not move for a very long time. She shifted about in place, watching me intently.

“Why me?” She asked quietly. “Why- why do you care for me so much?”

“I think you’re pretty.” I said.

She froze.

“That’s it?” She squeaked. “That’s it?”

“That’s all I need.” I said quietly.

She shook her head.

“You’re just like him.” She said. “You’re just like everyone else-“

“I am, and I am not.” I said. “I’m a man, like any other. But I’m a man who cares about you.”

“No you don’t.” She sniffed. “How could you?”

I smiled at her and leaned in closer. “Because I’ve gotten to know you.” I said. “I know how the idea of love scares you- how you associate it with the worst possible things that could happen to you. But you know the importance of it too, don’t you? I don’t want to lose you- like Lenore was lost.”

She sniffed.

“Death is the only thing that awaits us all.” She said quietly. “It’s the only certainty in life. I have- longed for it, my entire life. I want to be at peace.”

“You can have it now, while we’re both still alive.” I said.

“I’m not sure that’s what I want.”

“Try.”

She looked at me, and, rather hesitantly, she reached forward and wrapped her fingers around mine. I pulled her to my feet and we looked at each other.

In the end she fell asleep as I carried her back to the surface, back to the city. More of her nightmares surfaced- but they tended to lurk in street corners and alleyways- incapable of coming near my light.

I knew it wasn’t a good idea to leave her alone- so I ended up laying next to her in bed and watched her as she slept. The Nightmares surrounding us stared at us from afar, and I could feel my own desire to fall asleep overwhelming. But I lay there and watched her as her eyes fluttered open.

“Nothing happened.” I told her bluntly.

She pushed me away from her and got up.

“Like hell nothing happened!” She snapped. “What did you do to me?”

“Nothing.” I said quietly.

“You lie to me!”

“I’m not.”

She took the lamp on the beside table and raised it over her head. I closed my eyes and leaned back. She stared at me for a bit and then lowered her hand.

“You’re too strong…” she said quietly. “If you had wanted… you would have raped me a long time ago.”

She set the lampshade on the bedside and looked at me.

“I can’t love you.” She said. “This doesn’t… feel right.”

“You’re a broken person.” I told her softly. “I’m not expecting you to change right away.”

She bit her lip and then looked away from me.

“I’ve never met anyone… that I want to live for.” She said. “I don’t… it’s a scary thing for me. Wanting… to be around someone else.”

“I know.” I said. “But we’ll make new friends.”

Her eyes flashed.

“Will we?”

“Of course we will.” I said. “There are people like us out there, right? There have to be. It’s a big world out there, after all. Until I met you- I wasn’t sure if there was anyone out there who could love me either.”

She looked at me rather intently.

“Before I met you- I felt the same.” She said quietly. “But… you’re different. You… make me feel… things.”

She sat at the edge of the bed and glanced towards the door- somewhat longingly.

“Tell me.” She said. “Am I wrong in feeling this way?”

“I think anywhere is better than you were.” I said. “I don’t think either of us will feel the same way about things ten years from now. Things will be different then. But that doesn’t mean that you’re wrong now- you’re just one step closer to finding what you really want.”

“And what do I want?” She challenged me.

I answered:

“You want to follow your dreams. You want to find something that means a lot to you, and share that dream with other people. You want to find happiness and fulfilment in your life.”

“Doesn’t everyone want that?” She asked coyly.

“Maybe. But that’s all a dream is, really. It’s an idea of who we are.”

I was beginning to drift off, now. I wasn’t sure whether or not what I was saying made any sense. But I found myself surrounded by the golden light. Somehow, it wasn’t nearly as glorious as I remembered it.

I found a girl there, standing by herself on the hill. It took me a while to recognize her.

“Oh.” I said. “It’s you.”

She turned to look at me, her expression blank.

“So this is the end, is it?” She asked me, her voice hoarse. “You don’t need me anymore.”

I looked at her, and then I nodded. She sighed, and turned away from me.

“I always knew this day would come.” She rasped, as she gazed out over the hill.

“I’ll always be a dreamer.” I said.

She shook her head.

“It won’t mean as much to you.” She said. “The most important thing in the world to you was finding happiness, and now that you have it- never again will you dream as you have. Now- your role is to

encourage the dreams of others. That girl's- and the family you will start together.

"This is what I wanted." I said. "I won't miss this."

"You won't miss me?"

It dawned on me then that this would be the last time I would see her. I looked at her, one last time, as she smiled at me radiantly. She had begun to look like Kathleen until just recently… now she was looking more and more like Nightmare. But the real Nightmare was nothing like her.

"This is what we both wanted." She said quietly. "I'm just an idea, after all."

She took a step forward, and then fell off the cliff. I stood there as she disappeared- knowing that if I rushed in after her, I would spend the rest of my life obsessed with a fantasy- an obsession with a person that never existed.

I pushed her out of my mind and turned around. All sorts of ideas of what I wanted to do next were running through my head- I would need money, I would need a career, I would need a place to live, an education. I wanted to help people achieve their dreams. Before me stood a great city, brimming with people and problems for me to solve.

This was my new dream, one that I would carry with me for the rest of my life.

Fin

MESSAGE FROM THE AUTHOR

Thank you all supporting the Dream Warrior. This was a project that came out of nowhere- The entire project was finished in a little more than a month, and I had no outline or plan for it. My goal was only to make something dreamlike and surreal- something that I think is reflected in the final project.

I also intended on making it a children's book- and yet the final product is perhaps far too dark and bleak to be enjoyed by children.

The ideas in it reflect my own deeply held thoughts and feelings growing up, so I have decided to release it as it is without any serious cuts or adjustments to the themes or the plot. Children suffer too, and I feel that too many children's books shy away from that sad reality.

This is the first book in a very long time that I think truly represents me as a creator. It is the first I have finished since becoming fully self employed, and it feels far more in line with the sort of thing I always wanted to create growing up. I loved writing this book and want to create many more like it.

Thank you for your continued support. Please leave a review on Amazon, and please consider supporting my other books.

Harman Smith

Other projects include:

Eye of The Dragon By Harman Smith

Cruel And Beautiful by Harman Smith

Rabbit Hole by Harman Smith

Lauren Frey by Harman Smith

Jaw of the Dragon by Harman Smith

American Evil by Harman Smith

Playing Dirty by Harman Smith

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